ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
SECOND DECEMBER NUMBER

FEATURING

DESPERATE CHANCE
by Dorothy L. Bonar

RIDER FROM HELL
by Joseph Chadwick

The Littlest Lamb
A CHRISTMAS STORY
by Allan R. Bosworth

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We'll train and establish you in

Your Own Business

. . . even if now employed

We are enlarging this 24-year-old world-wide chain of Duraclean dealerships. Many excellent locations are still available in the U.S.A., Canada, and other countries. If you are reliable and diligent, this is an opportunity to increase your income . . . and have the freedom, financial independence, and prestige of YOUR OWN business.

These are full time dealerships . . . but you can start in spare time and have a profitable, lifetime business when your present job ends. A Duraclean dealer will train and assist you. He'll reveal his successful, proven methods and sales plans. He'll work with you.

Alert dealers can average $5 hourly gross profit on service they render plus $3 on EACH service-man at National Price Guide charges. This business is easy to learn . . . quickly established.

24 YEARS of PROVEN SUCCESS

You Become an Expert

in cleaning and protecting Rugs and Upholstery

DURACLEAN cleans by *absorption*. It eliminates scrubbing . . . soaking . . . shrinkage. Aerated foam, created by electric Foamovator, restores the natural lubrication of wool and other animal fibers in rugs and upholstery. Dirt, grease and many unsightly spots vanish. Fabrics and floor coverings are cleaned with *a new consideration for their life and beauty.*

This modern process avoids strong soaps and machine scrubbing! This eliminates unnecessary wear on fabric and the breaking of fibers.

DURACLEANING is done *in the home!* Customers like this *convenience.* Fabrics dry in a few hours. Rug pile again stands erect and even. Brilliant colors revive. Furnishings become clean, fresh and enlivened.

DURAPROOF is another year 'round service rendered in the home, office or institution—*without removing furnishings.* It protects upholstery, rugs, furs, clothing and auto interiors against damage by moths and carpet beetles.

U. S. Government says **"Moths are present in practically every household . . No section of country seems free from such infestations." DURAPROOF** kills moths and carpet beetles . . it makes materials non-eatable to both. **DURAPROOF** is the ONLY moth-proof service backed by an International Money Back, 6-Year Warranty.

Easy to Learn • No Overhead Expense

Permanent, Growing Market

Service is rendered *IN* homes, offices, hotels, theaters, institutions and to revive used-car upholstery for auto dealers. There is need for these services in almost every building. Duraclean dealers operate from their home, an office or shop, as they prefer. It's *easy to learn* . . . we quickly train you. Rendering service yourself, at first, prepares you to train and supervise service men.

Repeat and Voluntary Orders

Demonstrations win new customers. DURACLEAN Dealers find REPEAT and VOLUNTARY orders a major source of income. Customers, enthused with results, tell friends and neighbors. Furniture and department stores and others turn over rug and upholstery cleaning and mothproofing to **DURACLEAN** Dealers. We show you 27 ways to get new customers.

Two-Way Profit

You enjoy big profits on BOTH materials and labor—after paying service men and salesmen. This is a year-round large-profit business. You have the cooperation of a **24 YEAR OLD** organization interested in your success. If you want you should inquire now, TODAY, to become the owner of a **DURACLEAN** Service business, while territory is still available.

What Dealers Say

W. Lookiebill: We've had 20 years of pleasant dealings. I'm 65 but am setting my sights for 20 more years.
Gerald Merriman: $700 cleaning . . 13 working days.
P. D. Freidinger: 70% of our business is repeat.
A. Ullman: Every demonstration has been a sale.
Ellsworth: Your advertising certainly has paid dividends.
M. Lassanske: My original investment was returned in about two months. I am not sorry in any way that I started my business 'on a shoe string.'
R. Kimbrough: Finished First White House of Confederacy and am to **Duraclean** the Governor's Mansion.
Margarette Turner: Took in $106 in 15 or 18 hours.
L. Johnson: Each customer leads to 3 or 4 more.
T. Kemori: We have 1,000,000 yen contract Duracleaning for U.S. Army in Japan.

EASY TERMS

A moderate payment establishes **your own** business—pay balance from sales. We furnish electric machines, folders, store cards, introduction slips, sales book, demonstrators and **enough material to return your TOTAL investment.** Your business can be operating in a few days. **Mail coupon today! No obligation.**

Duraclean Co.

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Nationally Advertised

Your services are Nationally Advertised in Life, McCall's, Better Homes & Gardens, Ladies Home Journal, House & Garden, Maclean's (Canada's largest magazine), etc.

FREE Booklet

Our first letter and illustrated booklet will explain everything—the two modern, urgently needed services, waiting market, how business grows, your large profit, easy terms and PROTECTED territory. **Send Coupon TODAY!**

"OWN a Business" Coupon

DURACLEAN CO.
5-691 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

With no obligation to me, send booklet and letter giving full details. Tell me how I may OWN a growing business of my own built upon satisfied customers.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

You Practice SERVICING with Kits I Send You

Nothing takes the place of PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. You use parts I send to build many circuits common to Radio and Television. With my Servicing Course you build the modern Radio shown at left. You build a Multitester and use it to help make $10, $15 a week fixing sets in spare time while training. All equipment is yours to keep. Coupon below will bring book of important facts. It shows other equipment you build.

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I Will Train You at Home in Spare Time to be a RADIO-TELEVISION Technician

TELEVISION

Making Jobs, Prosperity

25 million homes have Television sets now. Thousands more sold every week. Trained men needed to make, install, service TV sets. About 200 television stations on the air. Hundreds more being built. Good job opportunities here for qualified technicians, operators, etc.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

Our 40th Year

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You Good Pay, Success

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N.R.I. Training Leads to Good Jobs Like These

I TRAINED THESE MEN

"Am transmitter-studio operator at KPAT. Most important day of my life was when I enrolled with NRI."—Elmer Frewaldt, Madison, S. Dakota.

"Made my first $100 from spare time work before I finished my course. Now I average better than $10 a week, spare time."—Frank Borer, Lorain, Ohio.

"I've come a long way in Radio and Television since graduating. Have my own business on Main Street."—Joe Travers, Asbury Park, New Jersey.

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My training is practical, complete; is backed by 40 years of success training men at home. My well-illustrated lessons give you basic principles you need and my skillfully developed kits of parts "bring to life" things you learn from the lessons. I start sending you special booklets that show you how to fix sets the day you enroll. Multitester you build with my parts helps you discover and correct set troubles, helps you make money fixing neighbors' sets in spare time while training. Many make $10, $15 a week extra this way.

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Act now to get more of the good things of life. I send actual lesson to prove NRI home training is practical, thorough. My 64-page book "How to be a Success in Radio-Television" shows what my graduates are doing and earning. It gives important facts about your opportunities in Radio-Television. Take NRI training for as little as $5 a month. Many graduates make more than the total cost of my training in two weeks. Mail coupon now to: J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5AQ, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 40th year.

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Good for Both—FREE

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Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book, FREE.
(No salesman will call! Please write plainly.)

Name ..... Age .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ... State .....

VETS write in date of discharge .....

How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

Mail Today-Tested Way to Better Pay

31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND DECEMBER NUMBER

December 17, 1954
Volume 189, No. 1

RANCH ROMANCES

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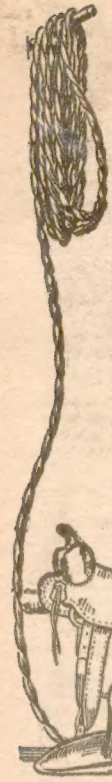

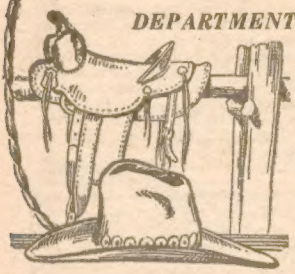

HELEN TONO
Editor

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Are you a **prisoner** in your present job?

Are you bored with your work? Do you go home at night tired from doing nothing? THOSE CAN BE DANGER SIGNALS!

If you're like the millions of other people before they turned to I.C.S. for help, these things are probably true about you:

You're caught between a job with no future and a family to support. You're sour on your job, hate to get up in the morning to go to work. At night, you're not much fun to have around.

Unless you do something about it, things are going to get worse. "Prisoners" aren't much good to their bosses or families.

And, of course, you can do something to "free" yourself . . . to get a better job, with more money. And insure yourself against layoffs that come to untrained men. To develop interest in your work. To earn the respect of your family and community.

HOW I.C.S. CAN HELP

Faced with such a problem, six million people have turned to I.C.S. for help. They studied at home, in their spare time. They developed new skills and new knowledge.

Did it pay off for them? Look at the record. In a single 120-day period, almost 2000 I.C.S. students were promoted to better jobs!

Take J. R. Todd. "Already I'm netting $120 a month profit on my investment," he says. "And there's more to come."

John R. Musik jumped from $180 to $360 a month. O. O. Braun from $120 to $600 a month. H. A. Howell got a $100 a month raise as a result of his I.C.S. training.

THESE OPPORTUNITIES OPEN FOR TRAINED MEN

Production in the field of Electronics has increased 20 times in 12 years. The Chemical business is increasing 10% a year. 2000 new TV stations have been authorized. Get your training while these opportunities still exist. Mail coupon for 3 free booklets *today!*

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City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to P.M._____

Occupation_____

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools, Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada. . . . Special tuition rates to members of the U. S. Armed Forces.

Shutter Bug

Dear Editor:

I am very lonely over in Korea, with lots of time on my hands, and enjoy writing letters. I am 27 years old, 6 ft, light brown hair, blue eyes, and weigh 195 lbs. I like all kinds of sports, and my hobby is photography. Would like to hear from any girls who wish to write a lonely airman. I will answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots.

A/1c WILLIAM C. JOHNSON AF-17265853
95th Bomb Sqdn. (L), Box 148
APO-902 c/o Postmaster
San Francisco, Calif.

Tennis, Anyone?

Dear Editor:

I am interested in various countries and sports, and I thought I would drop you a line. Maybe someone will hear my plea. I am 15 years old, have blond hair and blue eyes, am 5'5" tall, and weigh 117 lbs. My hobbies are tennis, swimming, and stamp collecting. I am interested in learning about your ways, and in return will tell you ours. I would appreciate a photo in the first letter.

MARGARET HOOPER
15 Romney Avenue,
Fennyden Park,
Adelaide, So. Australia

Horse Woman

Dear Editor:

I am 17 years old and have dark auburn hair and hazel eyes. I stand 5'4" and weight 125 lbs. I have many interests, horses being my favorite, as I do a lot of riding. I love to travel and can tell you many things about the Northwest. I also love western music. I promise to answer all letters, especially those from lonely boys in service.

MARION TEAL
1168 East Hastings Street
Vancouver 6, British Columbia, Canada

Guitar Player

Dear Editor:

How about a country boy joining your OUR AIR MAIL? I am 17 years old, stand 5'5½" tall, have brown eyes and hair. I have played the guitar and sung at dances and talent shows. I also like collecting snapshots and riding horses. I'll be more than glad to answer any questions, and will exchange snapshots with anyone.

BUSTER BOWDEN
Route 1
Paducah, Texas

Shy Bachelor

Dear Editor:

Can a "young," lonesome bachelor invade your Pen Pal column? I am 59 years old, and stand 5'8" tall. I neither drink or smoke, but like homemade candy. I'm a little on the shy side, but

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

---

considered a good sport. I get no mail, so am hoping all you wonderful people will overload my mail box.

BILL ARMSTRONG
Midval, Utah

Tim—ber-r

Dear Editor:

I am a lumberjack up in Northern Wisconsin. I am 22 years old, have sandy hair, and weigh 185 lbs. I enjoy all outdoor sports, especially horseback riding and fishing. I would like very much to exchange letters and pictures with other readers.

FRANK COUSINS
14 Silver Street,
Hurley, Wis.

A Friend to All

Dear Editor:

I am 38 years old and a widow with 3 children. I have blue eyes, brown hair, and stand 5'4". I work in a dress factory and very lonely. I will answer all letters I get.

MRS. LILLIAN HALLAUER
Box 306
Netawaka, Kansas

Indian Squaw

Dear Indian:

I am writing this letter hoping that it will find its way into OUR AIR MAIL column. I am a 19-year-old Indian girl. I stand 5'2", and my hair is black, my eyes brown. I enjoy reading, writing, movies, and music, especially hillbilly. I would enjoy writing to boys over 19. I'm hoping my mail box will be stuffed with lots of letters from you guys.

RUBY FISBER
Box 21
Moopa, Nevada

(Continued on page 129)

NOW... get EVERYTHING YOU NEED to prepare to earn REAL MONEY in

TELEVISION

...one of America's **BRIGHTEST** Opportunity Fields

Enjoy highly interesting work ...and a wonderfully promising future

America's great billion dollar Television field now offers you a chance of a lifetime to get started toward a good job or your own profitable business. With so many new TV stations coming on the air, Television is expected to grow as never before! Millions of TV sets must be produced, tested, installed and serviced. And Television is only *one branch* of this vast opportunity field of Electronics—for which D.T.I.'s amazingly effective training prepares you.

Right in your own home you may now get one of today's most interesting . . . PRACTICAL WAYS to prepare for your start in TELEVISION, including Radio and Electronics. No previous experience or advanced education are needed—because D.T.I. brings you a 3-WAY COMBINATION method that speeds your understanding and progress. You (1) Learn from well illustrated lessons, you (2) Learn by Seeing from D.T.I.'s wonderfully effective home movies and (3) you Learn by Doing from electronic parts that provide the practical experience you need.

You get and KEEP the same type of basic electronic equipment used in our modern Chicago Training Laboratory. You get home training that includes the knowledge and experience gained from training thousands of students first hand. In other words, you get LABORATORY TYPE TRAINING . . . RIGHT IN YOUR OWN HOME. But why not get the whole exciting story. Mail coupon today.

If preferred, you can get ALL of your training in D.T.I.'s CHICAGO LABORATORY ... one of the nation's finest. Write for details.

EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

Get an honest-to-goodness EMPLOYMENT SERVICE to help you get a good job after graduating — or assistance in starting your OWN TV-RADIO SALES & SERVICE BUSINESS.

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If you're subject to military service, the information we have for you should prove very helpful. Mail coupon today.

EARN AS YOU LEARN

After you get part of D.T.I.'s training, with equipment at home, you may then, in your spare time, begin to earn real money servicing Radio and TV sets.

"One of America's Foremost Television Training Centers"

D.T.I.'s Training is available in Canada

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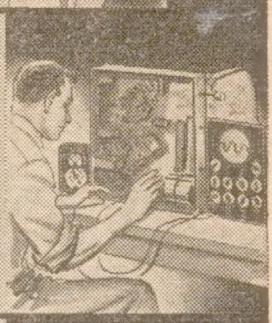
HOME MOVIES

Thanks to this exclusive D.T.I. home training aid, many important Television-Radio fundamentals quickly become "movie clear." Now you can actually see electrons on the march and other "hidden actions" — a wonderful advantage that's almost like having a teacher in your home.

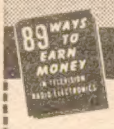
BUILD YOUR OWN TEST EQUIPMENT

As part of your home laboratory project you build and keep a quality 5-INCH oscilloscope and a jewel-bearing Multimeter. You will find this equipment ideal for helping you earn in your spare time while a student — and later when working full time in the field.



BUILD AND KEEP A BIG 21" TV SET

For added practical experience, you build and keep this top quality 21 INCH TV Set that provides TV reception at its finest (D.T.I. offers another home training but without the TV set.)



SEND FOR FACTS TODAY!

DeVry Technical Institute
4141 BELMONT AVE.
CHICAGO 41, ILLINOIS DEPT. TFG-1-L

I would like your Opportunity Bulletin showing "89 Ways To Earn Money In Television-Radio-Electronics"; also, complete facts about the training opportunities made possible by your organization.

Name_____ Age_____

Address_____ Apt._____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

THE INNOCENT QUERY of an Oakland, Calif., restaurant owner's wife as to when the repairman would return with the cash register brought the husband dashing out of the back room in a hurry. But he was too late to stop a thief who had walked off with the register, containing the day's receipts.

A 69-YEAR-OLD patient in a Dallas, Tex., convalescent home was so annoyed when he asked for a drink and got water that he spat out the water and threw the pitcher at the attendant.

GRAND JUNCTION, Colo., drivers are a careless but lucky lot. A recent survey recorded more than 13,350 traffic violations in 9 hours, but no accidents

A GRAND LARCENY charge was filed against a Paul Valley, Okla., man who stole a $50 item—an outhouse.

FOR A SAN FRANCISCO, Calif., man who ran to catch a bus, it was a bad day all round. He caught the bus, but his shoe flew off and broke a valuable store window.

A TEXAS OIL MAN'S Chicago apartment was burglarized of $11,000 worth of fur pieces, and $5,000 in cash which just happened to be around in a couple of piggy banks.

AN OFFICIAL of Los Angeles' Motor Vehicle Bureau, whose specialty is telling drivers how to avoid getting traffic tickets, got one himself for leaving a drive-in restaurant with the food tray still attached to the door of his car.

A LITTLE GIRL in Omaha, Neb., explaining how grapefruit is made, said, "They start out little and sweet, then get sour when they grow older. They're just like people."

IN THE ROSWELL, N. M., state legislature a motion was stricken from the books because nobody could understand it. It went like this: "I move that the paid unapproved bills be approved and that unpaid unapproved bills be approved be paid now or as funds become available."

A BOISE, IDAHO, housewife told police that, in her absence, a leisurely and absent-minded burglar entered her home, cooked a meal and left his overcoat.

IN ST. LOUIS, MO., a restaurant sign announces, "T-Bone, 25 Cents." The fine print below says, "With Meat, $3."

A SOLDIER in Kansas wrote to his mother in Texas, and the letter took ten days to arrive. Which wasn't bad, considering that the letter had been sent to Greece by mistake, and had to travel 14,000 miles to its destination.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

The Yellow Mountain

The lure of wealth sparks the action in UI's new Western of the men who fought and cheated for gold

IN MOST Westerns a hero is a hero and a villain is a villain. Nobody has the least difficulty telling them apart. But in Universal-International's new Western, *The Yellow Mountain,* Howard Duff plays a part that's a little of both.

That's what he told me when I chatted with him on the U-I lot, just after the last scene had been shot. I asked him to tell me what the picture was about, and he launched into a description of *his* part, naturally.

"You couldn't call Pete Menlo's heart black, but then neither is it pure white," said Howard. "And it's not gray either. It's more spotty."

"For instance," I prompted him, hoping to hear about the story.

"Well, one minute he's up to some shady tricks to cheat his partner out of a share in a gold mine, and not long afterward he risks his own life to save his partner's. Like people in real life, Pete is no angel, but he draws the line somewhere."

The partner is played by Lex Barker.

"Pure hero," said Howard, "and therefore not nearly so interesting."

But Lex came along at this point to defend himself—or rather to defend *his* part, Andy Martin.

I figured now I'd get a line on the plot. Instead I landed in the middle of an argument.

"Sure," said Lex, "Andy's a good guy, but that doesn't mean he's not true to life. There are plenty of heroes in the world, thank goodness. If it weren't for them, the West would probably still be a wilderness."

"It took courage, not virtue, to open up the West," Howard argued. "The pioneers who came out here weren't thinking about the future of America anyway. They wanted land or gold—and the more of each the better—just the same as Pete Menlo did."

"But they wanted to work for what they got," said Lex, "or fight for what was rightfully theirs, like Andy Martin. Most people then, as now, only wanted what

they deserved. I'd much rather play a fair and square guy, like Andy."

"Yes, but—" said Howard, and then I interrupted.

"I thought you were going to tell me about this movie of yours," I said, "not get into a philosophical discussion about the old West."

"Okay," said Howard. "Well, this guy Pete Menlo has actually made a couple of strikes in the 'yellow mountain,' and everybody else in the picture keeps trying to get it away from him."

"Hey, wait a minute," Lex objected. "Pete *gives* Andy a share in the mine so that Andy will help him protect it. They sort of join forces against a really black-hearted villain named Bannon. John McIntire plays this operator. And then there's an even worse character, a hired gunman named Drake, which Leo Gordon plays."

"But it turns out that, through a legal technicality, the whole mountain really belongs to a poor gambler named Jackpot," Howard went on. "That's William Demerest, a weakling who can't stop playing poker, though he never wins."

"And he has a daughter, Nevada—that's Mala Powers—whom both Pete and Andy are in love with," said Lex. "But Pete has a funny way of showing it. He tries to cheat Jackpot out of his claim."

"But Jackpot doesn't really deserve the claim," Howard added. "Pete is the one who found the strike and who dug the ore—so why should Jackpot get it through some forgotten law that's still on the books? And anyway, at the end Pete saves everyone from Bannon and Drake."

"And for his trouble," Lex said, grinning, "he gets a punch in the nose."

"That's the story," Howard finished. "All clear?"

I felt a little dizzy. "I guess," I said weakly, "I'd better see the picture."

I did, a while later, and I enjoyed every bit of it. It has a great story. You see, there's this guy Pete, and his partner, Andy . . . .

But this is where you came in, isn't it?

Lex Barker, William Demerest and Mala Powers see trouble ahead

PHYLLIS KIRK

It Wasn't All Luck

WHEN I heard that Phyllis Kirk has been writing an article on how to get into the movies, I rushed right over to see her and get the lowdown. I've known Phyl for some time, since we both work on the Warner Bros. lot. She had been making *Thunder Over the Plains* with Randy Scott, while I was doing *Dial M for Murder,* and we'd talked about the lucky breaks which usually are responsible for starting movie careers.

So naturally I was surprised to hear that she had worked out a formula for getting to be a star.

She grinned when I asked her about it. "I still think it takes luck," she admitted. "But when the break comes your way you've got to be ready. Being ready often means a lifetime of preparation."

Phyllis thinks an actress may be born talented, but she's made attractive—usually by her mother.

"Good posture, good grooming, a good figure and a pleasant voice—they're not inborn," she declared. "Anyone can have them, and anyone who has them is attractive."

"So good looks come first," I said, "ahead of acting ability."

"They're not more important, but they do come *first.* Unless a girl is attractive, she'll never get a chance to show off her acting ability."

Phyl could have used herself as an example—and she's not foolishly modest enough to deny her own good looks. She knows that her green eyes, auburn hair and slim but curvy figure played a big part in every step up the ladder.

She always wanted to be an actress, but her first job was as a perfume consultant in a New York department store. A photographer saw her there and got her a modeling job.

That job—and her good looks—led to a part in a Broadway show. A Hollywood scout saw her on the stage, and presto, a screen test and a movie contract.

"It sounds simple, or as if I just got lucky breaks," Phyllis went on, "but as I look back, I don't think it was. My mother was a trained nurse who taught me good health habits early. If you think about it, you realize that good health is a big part of good looks."

"But not all," I objected.

"No, not all," she agreed. "There's glamor, too, and that's much more important than pure beauty. You know what I did the other day? Gave away all my blue jeans, bobby sox and mocassins."

"But why?" I asked, puzzled by this sudden turn in the conversation.

"Glamor, that's why. I like to wear jeans as well as anybody—and the older and sloppier the better. But I decided I couldn't possibly look glamorous in them, and I gave them away so I wouldn't be tempted to wear them."

I said I didn't know much about glamor but it seemed to me that it would be a strain to go in for it all the time.

She nodded at me and winked. "I think it might be—and I'll tell you a secret. I saved one pair of jeans—the most faded, the most threadbare of all—to wear when I wash the dog."

Well, I didn't keep Phyl's secret, did I? But I thought you ought to know that besides being beautiful, healthy and glamorous, the gal is human, too.

Warner Bros.

Phyllis has worked out a formula for success

DESPERATE

CHANCE

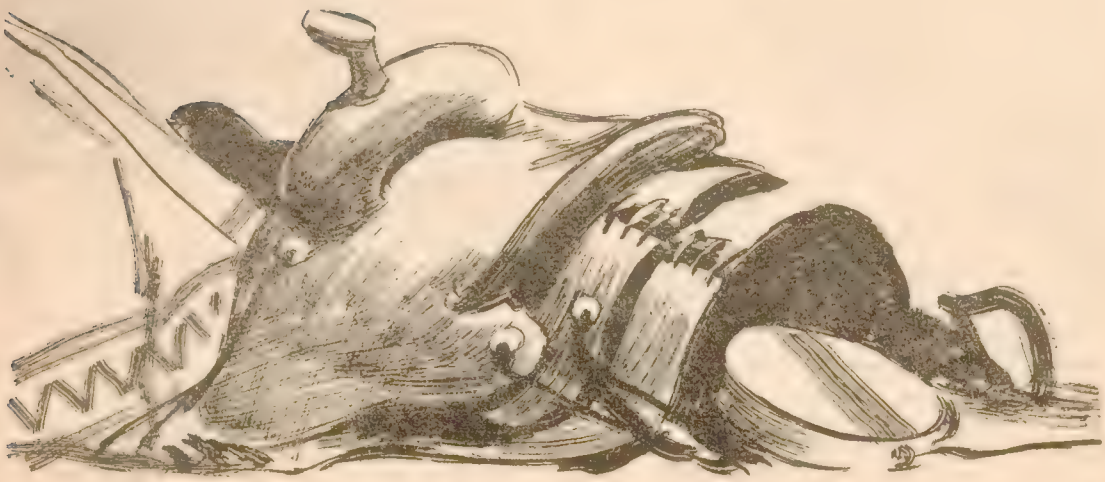
by DOROTHY L. BONAR

EX-CONVICT STEVE WELDON wanted to go straight . . . but everyone was against him except the bank robber's beautiful daughter

HE WAS halfway through the Pass when the storm broke. Ducking his head before a sudden onslaught of wind-driven sleet and snow, Steve Weldon shivered. His three years in the State Pen had thinned his blood. He hadn't counted on that when he'd disregarded the Carson Junction livery stableman's friendly warning.

"This is no time to try crossing the Lodestones, mister. Those dark clouds will mean only rain in the foothills. But the Pass is nearly 11,000 feet high. You'll run into a blizzard up there, sure. Better wait for the weather to clear."

But Steve couldn't wait. He'd given himself a month of freedom



and idle roving—four weeks of sun and wind that had covered a square, ruggedly-featured face with a coating of tan and had worn the stiff newness out of levis and stetson. He could pass as an ordinary cowhand now, and he had to find a job without further delay if he wanted to continue eating. No local outfit needed an extra rider at this time, it seemed. But he had been told that there was always a demand for riders in the vicinity of Gunlock. So he had set out for the town on the other side of the mountains, confident that if he should run into a storm at high altitude it could not, in the middle of June, be severe enough to imperil his life. Now he was beginning to have strong doubts on that score.

Shifting reins, Steve shook his cold benumbed left hand vigorously. His feet felt like chunks of wood in the stirrups. Sleet, turning to pellets of ice, stung his face like buckshot whenever he raised it from the shelter of his hat brim to peer ahead. At mid-afternoon the darkness about him was almost like that of night.

"Got to find a place to hole up," Steve muttered.

A niche or hollow out of the wind, where a fire could be built, would do.

Swinging stiffly to the ground, Steve trudged ahead of a mount that with every step revealed its desire to turn tail to the storm. The exercise warmed him, but not enough. The near mountainside was a sheer rock wall to his left. Within a few miles the trail would start downward. As it lost altitude it would pass out of the storm belt. Steve was beginning to wonder, grimly, if he'd last that long, when a sudden popping sound rose above the noises of the elements.

IT WAS a gunshot. Halted in his tracks, Steve waited vainly for more to follow. All he could hear was the howling of the wind, and the beating of sleet, like thousands of tiny triphammers upon himself and his horse. It was unlikely to have been a signal of distress, then. Unless . . .

Steve pushed futile speculation aside and hurried on. Abruptly the rock wall at his left dropped back, forming a deep curve. There firelight marked the mouth of a sizable cave. Eagerly Steve pressed forward, and burst upon a scene that rooted his feet in snow, with the fury of the blizzard still beating upon his back.

Freshly fueled, the fire crackled cheerily, yellow and red flames licking high and bright. Beyond it stood a pair of horses, stripped of rigging. Saddles and bedrolls, together with a steaming pot, skillet, and used eating utensils, gave evidence that camp had been made here at least an hour ago. These details Steve noted subconsciously. It was the activity of the two campers that leaped out at him.

Inside, the cave was all of twenty feet wide. To the left a man stood half-crouched over the form of another, who was sprawled on the ground as though he had just been knocked down. Steve had no wish to intrude upon a private quarrel. Yet memory of the shot fired moments ago stirred wariness. A second-hand cartridge belt and Colt's .45 had been one of his first purchases upon release from prison.

Placing his hand on the butt of the six-gun, he called out, "What's going on here?"

Plainly the noises of the storm had covered the small sounds attending his arrival. At the ring of his voice the man on his feet started and whipped about. In size he was a good match for Steve's even six feet, one-hundred-eighty pounds. In his middle thirties, he had black or dark brown eyes, black hair worn with long sideburns, and a small black mustache. Expressions too fleeting to define passed over his face and crystallized into amazement.

"Where'd you come from?" he exclaimed.

"I'm on my way to Gunlock," answered Steve. "I thought I was a goner in the storm, and then I heard a shot."

The man's face cleared, and he nodded. "My prisoner grabbed my gun and it went off." Pushing open an unbuttoned windbreaker, he revealed a star pinned to the pocket of a fancy blue shirt. He introduced himself. "I'm Deputy Sheriff Lew Bettger."

Steve relaxed and moved farther into the cave, his grey following. "My handle's Steve Weldon," he replied. "I—"

He stopped, for at that moment the supine figure on the ground stirred and sat up. It was a small figure, clad in jeans, scuffed boots and a fringed buckskin jacket. A grimy hand lifting dizzily to a forehead caused a sombrero, knocked askew, to fall off. As a mass of brown curls tumbled downward, the hand was lowered. Steve stared at a delicately oval face that was grimy, tear streaked, and childishly appealing. Anger surged through him.

"A girl!" he burst out hotly. "And only a kid. You—"

But the lawman interrupted with a twisted, placating smile. "That's the way I figured, too, at first," he declared. "So I didn't bother with handcuffs. That's what gave her the chance to make a break and almost finish me off. I had to hit her to make her let go of the gun."

"He's a liar," said the girl bitterly. "He hit me after he had it back."

She rose to her feet as she spoke. Her buckskin jacket swung open, revealing her to be older than Steve had first judged. In tight-fitting jeans and flannel shirt, her small, slim figure had all the enticing curves of fully-developed womanhood. As she walked to the fire, coppery glints danced in her hair. Her eyes were blue with long, wet-tangled lashes, and despite a dirty face she was pretty. Suspicion turned Steve's grey eyes stony.

BETTGER, with his dapper mustache and expensive clothes, looked just the kind of dandy apt to fancy himself a lady's man. And just because he wore a star didn't mean he couldn't be the kind to lose his temper and turn mean, when he went too far and was put in his place.

"Was he trying to force himself on you, Miss?" asked Steve quietly.

"Look here!" The deputy voiced an angry protest.

But Steve's gaze remained on the girl. A startled look flashed over her face. "No. Not the way you mean." She stopped. Her expression changed to one of chagrin, and she bit her lip.

The lawman laughed. "Spoke a little too fast that time, didn't you?" he jeered. Turning to Steve, he said, "If she'd thought a minute, she'd have played along with that fool notion of yours and appealed to you for protection. While we were fighting she might have got the drop on us both."

It was a pretty scurvy accusation to make, thought Steve. Yet the girl's averted gaze and reddening face left little doubt that it had been a just one. She had been tripped up by a habit of truthfulness, but she would go to any lengths to escape. He'd better remember that, and take care to remain an innocent bystander. With his prison record he couldn't afford a brush with the law over a matter that did not concern him.

This line of reasoning enabled him to check an involuntary protest when Bettger picked a pair of handcuffs off the ground and snapped them on the girl's wrists.

"If you'd behaved like this before, you wouldn't have been hurt," he told her. To Steve he added shamefacedly, "I did get a little too rough. But she almost plugged me, and she fought like a catamount."

Steve expected a new outburst from the girl. Instead she knelt and began awkwardly to spread out one of the bedrolls. "I'll do that for you," said the deputy. As he took over the task he said to Steve, "Unsaddle your cayuse, Weldon. There's coffee left, and plenty of grub in that pack. Help yourself."

Disarmed by this gesture of friendly hospitality, on top of the girl's apparent lapse into guilty sullenness, Steve was glad to make himself comfortable. Yet there were many questions he wanted answered. He framed them in his mind while making a place for his blankets and saddle beside the fire.

Bettger, however, came up with one first. "Did you say you were heading for Gunlock, Weldon?"

"Yes," answered Steve.

"Got friends there? Ever been there before?"

"No. I just heard tell they're always in need of tophands in those parts." He shrugged.

"So you're a drifting cowhand looking for a job. Where are you from?"

Steve controlled an inward tightening of

resentment. As deputy sheriff, responsible for helping to maintain law and order throughout a wide area, Bettger had a right to do a certain amount of checking up on strangers. It was part of his job.

"Arizona, originally," Steve answered. "I've drifted around a lot, though. Punched cows last for the ML, about a hundred miles south of Billings."

It was true, word for word. His work inside prison walls had nothing to do with cattle or riding. And his answers seemed to satisfy the lawman's official curiosity.

TAKING a pipe from a coat pocket, Bettger began to fill it from a leather pouch. Steve glanced at the girl. She was watching him in a desperate, searching fashion. As their eyes met she seemed on the point of speaking. But doubt or fear held her back, and she looked away.

Steve said, "What's she wanted for?"

The lawman selected an ember from the fire and it seemed to Steve that he was overlong lighting his pipe. Could he be stalling in order to frame a suitable answer? Steve dismissed the suspicion impatiently. Any lawman who had been forced to deal a little roughly with a young, attractive prisoner was bound to appear in a somewhat questionable light.

As though he realized this, the deputy spoke frankly and to the point when he began. The girl's name was Tacy Moore and she was under arrest for having aided and abetted the escape of a bank robber.

Something impelled Steve to say, "You sure about that?"

"I was there," answered the deputy, with a slight, rueful smile. "Oh, I know she looks too young and innocent to be mixed up with that kind, but don't let her looks fool you. She's Bill Moore's brat, and Bill served a ten-year term for bank robbery. When he got out four years ago, he made a big hullabaloo about going straight. He dug up some of the old loot he had stashed away and—"

"That's a lie!" blazed Tacy. "Dad put me in a boarding school back East when he went to prison. Money left me by my mother's folks paid my way. There was still some left when Dad got out, and we used that to start up the Rail M."

Bettger shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. That part doesn't matter anyway. This does: Bill Moore and Rory Wade were two of the five men who robbed the Gunlock bank three days ago. They were recognized, so you can't deny it."

"I'm not trying to," retorted the girl passionately. "Dad *was* in on the job. But not because he wanted to go back to the old life. He . . ."

"Regardless of his reasons, he broke the law," Bettger interrupted smoothly. "He and Rory Wade have to be caught the same as the other two."

"Who's Rory Wade?" inquired Steve.

"The Rail M's one and only cowhand," said Bettger sardonically. "It's the kind of two-bit outfit that can't afford to hire a regular crew. Far as that goes, I doubt if Wade got paid very often. But he was just the kind of wild young hellion to make a hero out of an old owlhoot like Bill Moore —and I reckon he and Tacy are sweet on each other."

The last remark earned a look of withering scorn from the girl. As though realizing that her admission of her father's guilt made further defensive arguments futile, however, she lapsed once more into silence. While Steve filled up on bacon, canned beans, and coffee, the lawman finished his story.

The three accomplices of Moore and Wade were strangers in Gunlock, and the robbery might have gone off smoothly had not a bank clerk made the valiantly foolish mistake of reaching for a gun. The sound of the shot that stopped him aroused the town. Bullets greeted the bandits when they emerged from the bank. One, since identified as a man named Red Shaeffer, notorious in three other states, had been wounded and left behind for the law to gather in. The others had been forced to split up. Two, names unknown, had gone one way, while Moore and Wade went another.

"SHERIFF HOLMAN got a posse together in a hurry," continued Bettger. "He led half of it and I led the other. My party ran our horses almost to death for nothing. When we went back to town for fresh mounts, I found the sheriff had sent back a rider with a message for me. He figured the bandits would have arranged to meet at a certain place, in case they got separated. He wanted someone to watch the Rail M, figurin' Tacy'd know about the meeting place, too, and would head out to join her father there."

"And she did?" queried Steve.

"Not exactly. She claims she didn't know any more than we did until Wade sneaked back last night to take her to her old man. Seems Moore had picked up a posseman's bullet and was in pretty bad shape. Anyway, I'd taken over the job of watching the Rail M myself. I aimed to follow them to the hideout. But Wade got wise to someone on their trail. We had a set-to and Wade got away, on account of her grabbing my gun arm and hanging on. I knew it'd be foolish to try to go on with her on my hands. I figured if she knew she was heading for jail she'd maybe open up and tell where the hide-out is. So I turned back with her, and the storm caught us here."

It was a straightforward, convincing story. At least so it seemed to Steve. Still, the look of scorn and hate the girl bestowed upon the lawman at its conclusion stirred uneasiness. Again it seemed to accuse Bettger of lying. Or was that just his imagination?

There was no hobble on her tongue, and she hadn't hesitated to call her captor a liar on two previous points. Moreover, she had admitted her father's and Rory Wade's guilt. In spite of it, she was still fighting to protect them, so it could be only this loyalty that inspired her hatred of the lawman. Steve could appreciate loyalty to loved ones. He felt sorry for her. Yet Bettger was merely doing his duty. That left him without the remotest excuse to interfere.

The reluctance with which he came to that decision angered Steve abruptly. She was pretty and appealing, and he'd been shut away from feminine company for a long time. Damned if he'd let that combination of circumstances turn him soft in the head.

Resolutely he avoided looking at Tacy Moore thereafter. He talked with the deputy in a desultory fashion. Having made his explanation, Bettger seemed to prefer silent thought to the sound of his voice. Steve, never fond of talk for talk's sake, was satisfied to have it so.

They turned in early. Despite weariness, Steve found it hard to go to sleep. Twice he replenished the fire after it had died down to a bed of glowing coals. Each time

Bettger reared up in his blankets, gun in hand—as though his prisoner were a big, tough desperado instead of a slip of a girl, thought Steve. But he realized that the lawman's wariness could have a great deal to do with him, a stranger and an unknown quantity.

Outside, the wind continued to howl. The sound seemed eventually to travel away and fade, as Steve's eyelids grew heavy. He dozed. It seemed only a moment had passed when he snapped awake. To his surprise the fire had died so low as to shed scarcely any light. Wondering what had aroused him, Steve lay still, turning his head noiselessly and straining his eyes to pierce the gloom. Only the vague outlines of near objects were discernible—a small mound that was Bettger's food supplies and camp utensils, stacked together in readiness for use in the morning; the long, blanket-covered form of the deputy himself.

A soft scuffling sound stiffened Steve's every nerve and muscle. It came from behind him but high, near his head. Holding his breath, Steve became aware of a presence close, and leaning closer. Comprehension was instant.

TWICE Bettger had demonstrated that he slept with his gun practically in his hand under his blanket. Steve, removing cartridge belt and holstered weapon for comfort, had rolled them up and placed them on the ground beside him, within easy reach. It hadn't occurred to him that the girl would notice and find it a temptation. He marveled that she had been able to leave her place and circle both him and Bettger without arousing the lawman. When she reached for the gun, he knew a sudden impulse to let her take it.

But she would be better off taken back to Gunlock. Thus far she had merely attempted to reach and protect her father, for which any group of Westerners was more apt to admire than condemn her. Should she shoot Bettger in her desperation, however, or go too far on her father's behalf, such leniency would become impossible. And prison life was tough enough on a man . . .

Steve was not aware of following that line of reason, step by step. There merely flashed through his mind a conviction that this girl had to be stopped for her own good. Through slitted eyelids he saw her hand close on the gunbutt, inches away. Swiftly he reached out and seized her wrist.

She did not scream. With a little gasp she tried with all her might to draw the weapon clear of leather, despite him. His tightening grip held her easily.

"Please." The whisper was half a sob. "Please—help me!"

"That's what I'm doing," said Steve aloud, "although you might not be able to appreciate it now."

He got no farther. Awakened by the sound of his voice, the lawman whipped to a sitting position. Steve heard his voice bark out, but the words were unintelligible. For suddenly the girl uttered a wild cry and flung herself upon him. Somehow Steve lost his grip on her wrist. Then he felt again the steel manacles holding them together. This time a sharp edge caught him over the left eyebrow as he grappled with her furious thrashing figure. Blood gushed warmly down his face. Dimly he was aware of Bettger's shouts and scurrying movements.

It was too dark for the deputy to do anything. Fortunately his help was not needed. They rolled over twice, scattering coffee pot and cooking utensils with a tinny clatter. Then Steve managed to force her manacled hands down between them. Encircling her with both arms, he hugged her to him tightly, rendering her helpless to do more than kick.

"Build up the fire," he shouted to Bettger. To the struggling girl he added pantingly, "You're just—wearin' yourself out—for nothing."

She turned rigid from head to foot. Then all the resistance drained out of her. Suddenly limp, she hid her face against him and began to weep, silently, hopelessly.

A million white hot sparks shot through Steve. Her hair was silken against his chin. She was warm and firmly soft and curving.

He released her and scrambled to his feet faster than he had ever before moved

in his life. Bettger had thought of a light simultaneously as he'd yelled for one. Already fresh fuel crackled in raked up live coals. Quickly flames shot up. As they chased darkness, Steve stared down at the girl.

APPARENTLY she wasn't one to give in to the weakness of tears for long. Sitting up, she scrubbed at her eyes with her hands, and gazed up at him defiantly. Tight-lipped, Steve moved back two steps, picked up his gunbelt, and buckled it about him. Striding to the cave entrance, he stooped and began to press handfuls of snow to the bleeding slash above his left eye.

He had slept more than he'd realized. The storm was over. Grey streaks in the sky announced the approach of dawn. At length, drying his face on a bandana, Steve turned back into the cave. By then the fire burned brightly. The girl and lawman were eyeing each other across it in implacable enmity. Steve had an uncomfortable feeling that there was more between them than had been revealed.

Irked, he said shortly, "The sun will be up in an hour. We'd better get ready to pull out."

Bettger gave himself a little shake. "Good idea. Suppose you saddle up while I rustle breakfast?" As Steve moved to comply the deputy added, "Thanks, Weldon. And since one good turn deserves another, I'll tell you where you can be sure of getting a job. A friend of mine owns the Double Bar B north of town. You tell him I sent you and he'll put you on."

"Don't do it!" burst out the girl. "He's been looking for an excuse to get rid of you between here and Gunlock. That badge he's wearing doesn't mean a thing."

"You mean he stole it—isn't a real lawman at all?" demanded Steve.

Bettger uttered an angry growl. "Can't you see what she's up to, Weldon? I told you she'd try to play one of us against the other."

But Steve persisted. "Is that what you mean, Miss?"

"No," she admitted reluctantly. "He's Sheriff Holman's regular deputy, all right. But he . . ." She stopped, biting her lip.

"What?" demanded Steve. "Why should he be so anxious to get you off alone? What's between you two anyway? The bank loot?"

It was a wild shot in the dark. And it proved a dud. The girl's lips parted, only to remain so, mutely.

"The bank's money was recovered," growled Bettger. "It was all in one pair of saddlebags. Red Shaeffer had 'em and when he dropped in the street none of the others had a chance to pick 'em up."

"Is that so?" Steve demanded of the girl.

"No! He—" Again she stopped, biting her lip.

The deputy shrugged, smilingly crookedly. "You just put another idea into her head, Weldon," he said. "The loot amounted to $30,000. Likely she'll try to dangle that before you on the q.t. now and offer you a cut for throwing in with her against me. Don't be fool enough to fall for such a trick."

Steve didn't know what to believe and this angered him, for logic argued on the deputy's side. Bettger's story hung together, while on every turn he had confused the girl and forced her to back down. Yet he found himself wanting to lean her way. Why? He could think of no reason save that she was a girl and Bettger had struck her. Yet Bettger couldn't be blamed so much for that, wildcat that she had proved herself. The gash over his eye throbbed. If she got the chance, she'd probably do worse next time. Was he willing to forget that simply because she was feminine and attractive, and because just looking at her made him remember how she had felt in his arms?

Steve cursed silently. "Let's get going," he snapped.

BY THE time they were ready to depart, the sun was a great red ball in the sky. Outside the cave lay a white, glistening world of snow three feet deep on the level. The air was still but not too cold.

"You and me had better change off breaking trail," said Bettger. "Tacy can ride."

In this fashion they set forth. It was tough going for two hours. Then they started downward and the depth of the snow began to decrease. Presently patches of green appeared on lower slopes. Snow became slush and rivulets of water. By noon the last of it had been left behind. They continued downward through mountain terrain rich with timber, and carpeted with spring flowers and grass a-glisten with the aftermath of rain.

At mid-afternoon Bettger drew rein on an open benchland. Far below, a portion of a broad green valley lay in view.

"Gunlock's around that curve to the south," said the deputy, "about twenty miles from here. Double Bar B headquarters are only five—that way." He pointed northward. "Head straight northeast from here and you can't miss it. Good luck, Weldon."

Unconsciously Steve stiffened. Was Bettger merely being helpful out of gratitude? Or was he actually using that pretext as an excuse to get rid of an unwelcome third party?

Steve glanced expectantly at Tacy Moore. But she did not again express fear of being left alone in the lawman's custody. Gazing off into space, she seemed to ignore them both. But Steve noted suddenly that her figure was tense, while the knuckles of the fingers gripping her saddle horn showed white. It was as though she believed further argument or appeal to be futile and was thus bracing herself for an imminent ordeal.

Hell! thought Steve. Yet he managed to speak casually. "Reckon I'll ride on into town first," he said. "I'm plumb out of smoking."

The lawman's face darkened. Nevertheless, he shrugged. "Suit yourself."

He led the way down a steep trail off the benchland, dismounting in a little park at the bottom to tighten his saddle girth. It was a sensible move after all the steep downhill travel they'd done.

"How's yours?" inquired Steve to the girl.

"All right," she said.

Steve dismounted to check anyway, and took the latigo up two holes. "Another down pitch and you'd have been under this bronc's belly," he reproved her. "You'd ought to know better—"

"Look out!" she screamed.

He hadn't turned his back squarely upon Bettger. The doubts he was unable to dismiss had seen to that. But he had turned sidewise and given his full attention to the girl momentarily. At her scream he whipped about, ducking instinctively.

Bettger had closed in on him with a noiseless step. He glimpsed the deputy's face, dark and twisted with malicious purpose. Simultaneously a gunbutt missed its aim, whistled past his ear and glanced off his shoulder. The blow hurt, but not enough to cripple him. The next instant he grappled with his assailant. Tripping over each other's feet, they crashed to the ground. With frightened snorts and hoof stompings the two unmounted horses swung apart, leaving them an open area in which to struggle.

Steve found himself exerting every nerve and sinew to the utmost. Although they were evenly matched for size and strength, Bettger's wind proved the better. He didn't have three years of prison life recently behind him. Steve's lungs began to labor painfully. He gave as many solid blows as he took, yet Bettger showed no sign of weakening. Twice he secured a throat hold that Steve broke only with a driving knee to his middle. The second time Steve catapulted him clear.

LANDING on his back, arms outflung, Bettger's right hand found and closed on a rock twice the size of his fist. Scrambling up, he hurled it at Steve's head. The missile whistled by. Had in connected it would have brained him, Steve realized. Suddenly his blood ran cold with the knowledge that Bettger's aim was to kill. There was murder in the deputy's face, and his hand droped to his holster.

It was empty. Instinctively matching the gesture, Steve discovered that his sixgun had also slipped out of its uncovered leather

sheath as they'd rolled about on the ground. He spied one weapon and dived for it. But it lay closer to Bettger, and the latter scooped it up. Leaping backward, he fired. In his haste he missed. And he never had a chance to try again.

Neither had had time to give a thought to the girl, still in her saddle. Suddenly she sank in spurs and sent her mount leaping into the deputy. Struck glancingly by the horse's broad chest and shoulder, Bettger uttered a startled bawl as he was slammed to the ground. Tacy's sorrel whinnied, reared, and almost fell, as she attempted to pivot it for a second charge.

But this was not necessary. Before she could bring her mount under control once more, Steve was upon the deputy. Snatching up the gun knocked out of the latter's hand, he rapped its barrel to the side of Bettger's head. Bettger grunted, fell on his face, and made no further move.

Somehow Steve managed to pick up both guns, putting his own back in its holster and sticking Bettger's into the waistband of his levis.

In the meantime Tacy had stepped down from her saddle. Running to the unconscious lawman, she searched his pockets for the key to the handcuffs on her wrists. Re-

Tacy was kneeling beside Steve, asking for his jack-knife

moving the manacles, she threw them fiercely as far into the brush as she could.

"Those things can be chiseled apart," said Steve, then. "And they don't make you altogether helpless. So why didn't you hightail when we piled into each other? It was the chance you've been looking for, wasn't it?"

Her blue eyes, steady and grave, met his. "Yes. But I couldn't take it knowing you'd provoked Bettger's attack by deciding to go on with us for my sake. I knew he'd try to kill you. He couldn't afford to leave a live witness behind."

Steve gave the unconscious lawman a hard glance. "What's he after so strong?"

"The bank loot, of course," she answered.

"He said it had been recovered."

"He lied. He was afraid you'd turn greedy and make a play for it too."

That figured, reflected Steve. Many a man would go to any lengths for $30,000. Many a woman, too.

He said, "You know where the loot is?"

She hesitated. "Yes. With my father and Rory Wade.

"And you know where they're hiding out?"

Again her hesitation was brief. "Yes. At a cabin in the mountains, where I was born and my mother died. We lived there until I was seven years old and Dad went

to prison. We've gone back to visit my mother's grave every summer since starting up the Rail M. Bettger wanted to get rid of you because he had no intention of taking me into Gunlock. He meant to force me to lead him to the loot. He'd started to beat me into submission back in the cave, when I grabbed his gun."

STEVE pondered. "Why didn't you come out with all this before?"

She spread her hands. "If one of you had killed the other I wouldn't have been any farther ahead. Besides, how could I tell you wouldn't turn out as bad as Bettger? Now I've got to take a chance on you." Her eyes searched his face. "Somehow I feel you're decent—and honest—"

"Don't count on that too much, sweetheart," said a groggy voice. "Thirty thousand bucks is a lot of dough." Pulling himself to a sitting position, Bettger squinted at the gun Steve had unsheathed quickly. "Better throw in with me, Weldon," he urged. "I'm no hog. I'll split that bank money with you straight down the middle."

"He'll shoot you in the back the first chance he gets," cried Tacy sharply.

Bettger slanted her an ironic grin. "Maybe. But he can guard against that if he's smart enough. He'd at least be giving himself a chance. The way things stand now, he's a gone goose."

"How do you figure that?" demanded Steve. "To stay in the clear, all I've got to do is take both you and the girl into Gunlock and tell the sheriff exactly what happened."

"You'll never make it to town," retorted the deputy. "It's quite a piece from here, and a lot can happen on the way. Possemen, for instance. These parts ought to be crawling with 'em. Why do you suppose I tried to finish you off first without firing a shot? There are probably riders heading this way right now."

"I'll take my chances with them," said Steve.

But he was worried. To be caught here would place him in a ticklish position. Tacy was the daughter of one of the bank robbers. Even should she back up his story, her word would carry little weight against that of Bettger, the sheriff's chief deputy. His own would be equally discredited, when it came out that he was an ex-convict. And it would be easy for the crooked lawman to twist the truth. He need only claim that this drifter encountered by chance had accepted from the girl the same proposition he himself had offered—a cut of the bank loot in exchange for his help.

His best chance was to reach Gunlock. However, if they were intercepted on the way, all might not be lost if they could only have pressed close enough to town to substantiate his claim that it was his objective. Winning that point would at least throw a cloud over any tale Bettger might concoct.

"We'll get going," said Steve grimly. "Mount up—both of you."

The girl's face fell. Her lower lip began to tremble. Hell! thought Steve savagely. Had she expected him to turn her loose because she'd saved his life? It hadn't been an unselfish action. The deputy was her arch enemy.

But Steve's battle with an inexplicable attack of compunction went no further. Bettger uttered an exclamation. Warily Steve glanced in the direction he pointed, and everything inside knotted up. Three horsemen had just topped a hill to the north.

"I said you were a gone goose, Weldon," exclaimed Bettger, triumphantly. "They'll believe my story, not yours and hers."

"Not if we lead them straight to town," retorted Steve grimly. "Mount up."

With a short laugh Bettger obeyed. "Lead out," Steve shouted to Tacy, leaping into his own saddle. But Bettger was already doing that. Three bounds put his horse into full stride. From the benchland they had descended to a grassy park perhaps half a mile in diameter. Straight across it Bettger raced. Then, looking over his shoulder to gauge his lead, he reined his horse sharply to the right and made for a draw leading back into the mountains.

Steve swore. Bettger had got the jump on him. He'd lose the girl, if he left her to chase the deputy, and she was the more important one to get to Gunlock. Bettger

knew that, faced with a choice, Steve would have to stick to Tacy Moore and let him go. And he was willing to gamble that Steve would not attempt to stop his flight with bullets, particularly within the sight of possemen. Bettger had brains as well as nerve.

"Keep going," yelled Steve harshly, as the girl half pulled up.

THEIR horses stretched out, side by side. The escaping deputy disappeared from sight. Looking back, Steve found the three possemen no longer on their hilltop. They were almost at the bottom of a steep slope, and coming fast. Bettger would lose no time joining them, and then—

A rattle of gunfire lopped off the thought. Again Steve looked back. The most optimistic of marksmen could scarcely hope to hit them at this range. Their pursuers were firing into the air in signal to other possemen ranging the vicinity, reflected Steve. He thrust away the fear of another party appearing to cut them off from town. One worry at a time was enough.

Soon they left the open park behind. This was foothills country, with juniper and cedar replacing pine and fir forest. It grew rougher. Rocks and gravel became more abundant underfoot, and the grass thinned out. They were penetrating an area similar to badlands. Steve had had the Montana breaks of the Missouri River described to him once. This must be about the same thing on a smaller scale, he thought, as they passed, single file, from one deep, winding cut to another. It would take many days for even an unlimited number of possemen to comb such terrain thoroughly. Also, here it would be easy to lose someone who did not know his own way.

Suspicion kindling, Steve called out to Tacy, "Hold on." When she paid no heed, he spurred his mount abreast of hers and seized her reins. After both horses were halted he listened for sounds of pursuit. There were none. Either the possemen had lost the trail or had been outdistanced.

"Are you sure you're heading for town?" he demanded.

Tacy's answer was never given. "Listen," she exclaimed tensely.

In a moment he, too, heard horse sounds. But they were coming from ahead, not behind.

"This way," cried Tacy.

Quickly she urged her mount into a cut branching off nearby. It broadened out into a small coulee. Here there was grass and a few scattered boulders. Along the base of a fifty-foot bluff grew a chokecherry jungle, many of the bushes reaching the proportions of small trees eight to ten feet high. Steve followed her into the thicket without protest. His chances of reaching town and clearing himself were getting slimmer. But if he could hold out until nightfall, maybe he'd make it yet.

A faint sound of shouting reached them. Either their tracks, turning off, had been noted, or the newcomers and their pursuers had met. Perhaps both.

"We'd better keep these cayuses quiet," said Steve.

Standing with silencing hands ready to close down upon soft muzzles, they waited. A magpie swooped by in a flash of black and white. Across the coulee a jay chattered. Presently shod hoofs rang on stone. Two men, wearing range garb, galloped into sight. Tacy identified them after they had passed. The tall, grey-haired man was Chet Webster, owner of the 3 Cross. The other, smaller and hawk-nosed, was Hank Allen, his foreman.

"They think we're beating it back into the mountains," Steve guessed. "Looks good for our chances of getting through. We'll wait right here until dark."

She spoke tonelessly. "Rory said my dad was badly hurt . . . that if I didn't get to him soon I'd never see him alive again."

Steve felt a stab of pity. "I'm sorry."

SHE took up the condolence swiftly. "If you mean that, let me go to him now! Afterward I'll do anything you say. You can come along and watch me every minute. Please."

Her pleading was hard to resist. Steve took refuge in roughness. "What kind of a fool do you take me for?"

"I'm not trying to trick you," she argued

earnestly. "And I'm not after the bank loot for myself, either. You can take that back to Gunlock. My father's in no condition to object, and I can handle Rory Wade. He's just a crazy kid looking for excitement who got more than he'd bargained for. I'm sure he can be talked into surrendering himself in order to get off as lightly as possible. And if you took him and the money in, along with me, clearing yourself would be a certainty. Can't you see?"

She wound up, breathless. She was a fast talker, Steve reflected with reluctant admiration. And she managed to make her proposition sound mighty enticing. But there was too much against accepting it. First, it would involve dodging possemen for two more days at least, instead of for just a few more hours. Second, her father might not be as bad off as she believed, or professed to believe. Nor could Rory Wade's co-operation be counted on. And if he, Steve Weldon, made the long gamble and lost. . . .

"No," he said curtly. "It's too big a risk. My best chance is to push on to town from here. That's what we'll do."

Tears of disappointment and despair filled her eyes. Goaded, Steve swore aloud. "I've got to put myself first," he cried savagely. "I know the kind of hell prison life is and I—"

He stopped abruptly. That he was an ex-convict was the last thing he wanted to let out to anyone—even to this daughter of an ex-convict. But the damage was done.

"I finished a three-year stretch in Deer Lodge a month ago," he said steadily. "I ran afoul of an amateur card shark in Bridger. I called him for dealing crooked, he pulled his gun, and I slugged him. When he fell his head hit the brass rail along the bar, and it killed him. Another feller in the game swore it'd happened the way I said. But he'd happened to be a local cattleman —something of a big wheel in those parts. The judge called it manslaughter anyway and gave me three years, to satisfy his friends. If I get into a jam with the law now, they won't look up the facts of my case. That I'm an ex-con will be enough to put me back behind bars."

She yielded without further argument. "I understand," she said softly. "Dad and I had that sort of thing to contend with too. Maybe the best and quickest way would be to lead Sheriff Holman to the hide-out. He's a good man—square and kind. And if he recovers the bank money he'll give Dad and Rory every break possible."

Relief flooded Steve. Sometimes it was hard to see the right way, and harder still to take it. Having the intelligence and courage to do both indicated real stature. Vainly Steve searched for a few comforting words.

"You'd better get some rest," he said awkwardly. "I'll graze the horses and stand guard.

ROLLED in her blanket, Tacy slept like a tired child. She had washed her face in snow in the Pass that morning, and her softly tanned skin was smooth and clear. She was more than pretty, decided Steve. Gazing at her was a delight, but a torment as well, for it tore at his resolution to go ahead as planned. Only the conviction that taking her to the sheriff without delay would be for her own ultimate good enabled him to stand firm. Still, he was glad when shadows gathered and at last veiled her features, lessening the strain of temptation.

He awakened her as soon as it was completely dark. Ravenously hungry by that time, there was nothing to do but take up his belt. Tacy made no mention of food or their lack of it. He had tightened saddle girths in readiness for departure. With scarcely a word she mounted and headed out.

A half moon rode the sky. Scudding clouds, passing before it continually, alternately cast hazy illumination and intense darkness over the landscape. Taking his bearings from the stars, Steve had no reason to question Tacy's course. Still he caused them to maintain a cautious pace, and called frequent halts to listen for sounds of other riders in the night. Always, on

these occasions, the only stirrings were natural ones.

As mile after mile dropped behind, Steve became aware of a mounting uneasiness. It didn't make sense that they should encounter no further trouble. This area should be alive with searchers. Bettger's logical move would have been to contact every available posseman and throw a cordon between this section and Gunlock.

To strengthen his story and discredit theirs, he had to capture them a reasonable distance from town. Should they press close enough to Gunlock to lend credence to their claim that they were coming in voluntarily, his scheming untruths would blow up in his face. Certainly that would cost him his job and his reputation, even if he had not succeeded, as yet, in anything concrete enough to warrant a criminal charge. He must be well aware of this.

On the other hand, he had had no accomplice in his scheme to get away with the bank loot. Maybe none of the available posseman had been the kind he had dared approach with a proposition of shared stolen wealth. When such possemen naturally assumed that the fugitives would flee toward the mountains, Bettger could not say otherwise without giving himself away.

Maybe he had slipped off and returned to Gunlock for a crony or two he could trust. Maybe he would be lying in wait to grab them quietly and whisk them away when they tried to enter town. Such a move, under cover of darkness and a late hour, could prove successful with a little luck, and Bettger had proved that he was not afraid to take a chance.

As a result of this speculation, Steve asked Tacy to let him know when they were still several miles from their destination.

"You'll see the town lights as soon as we come out of the hills," she told him.

It was past midnight by that time. When a cluster of twinkling yellow pinpoints appeared far ahead, Steve took the lead for the first time. Turning southward, he skirted the town widely and made his advance upon it from the east. Gradually the yellow pinpoints grew bigger and further apart. As befitted a county seat, Gunlock was larger than the average cowtown. But

"Got to find a place to hole up," Steve muttered

it was so quiet as to seem almost deserted. Probably every able-bodied man was out on posse duty, reflected Steve.

HOLDING to a slow, quiet walk, he came to the main street and halted in the shadow of a corner building. There were no saddle animals at hitchracks. No sounds of laughter or hurdy-gurdy music emanated from saloons.

"Where's the sheriff's office?" Steve inquired.

"Other side of the street—a block north."

Steve made his decision. "We'd better come up the alley behind it. Likely the sheriff isn't in right now, but inside will be the safest place to wait until he shows up."

Tacy did not demur. Through dark alleys and via many a devious turn, she brought him to his objective. The sheriff's office and the jail were in a long, one-storied building. At the bottom of a drawn shade at a back window gleamed a line of light. As they passed a shed in the back yard, Steve detected the sounds of a horse's restless moving inside.

"Sheriff Holman must be here after all," whispered Tacy excitedly. "He rides a bay thoroughbred he stables here and won't let anyone else touch. Bettger keeps his horse over at the livery barn."

Steve's heart began to pound fast and hard. Eagerly he crossed the back yard. Posts supporting the roof of a small porch provided a handy place for tethering their horses. Experimentally Steve tried the back door, expecting of course to find it locked.

To his surprise it opened noiselessly beneath his hand. With the panel inches ajar, he froze. The sheriff had Red Shaeffer, one of the bank robbers, in jail. That made it hard to believe he'd carelessly leave a door off the alley unlocked.

Alarm pounded through Steve's veins. Were they about to walk into a trap? Had Bettger been smart enough to make up a story that would undermine the truth and cast a false light on their purpose in coming here in this way?

He checked racing thoughts. That chance would have to be taken. He was not an outlaw, and he had no wish to become one. Telling his story, preferably to the sheriff, was his only hope of coming out of this in the clear.

Tense to his toes, Steve pushed the door inward slowly. A lighted kerosene lamp stood on an empty wood crate. The room was small, and it contained two made-up bunks, a number of men's garments hanging on nails, and a small, mirrored dresser bearing a wash basin and water bucket.

"The sheriff and Bettger are bachelors," whispered Tacy. "They sleep here and eat in the hotel dining room."

Steve nodded toward a closed door ahead. "That lead to the front office?" he murmured.

Tacy nodded. Her face was pale, her eyes big and dark. Suddenly, as though she needed encouragement to go ahead, she reached out and slipped her hand into his. The coldness of her fingers gave him a turn. The sooner this is over, the better for her, thought Stewe.

Thrusting his own qualms aside, he opened the second door. The room into which he gazed appeared unoccupied. It had one large window with a shade drawn. A lighted lamp stood on a cluttered desk, behind which was a battered swivel chair. There were rifles on the wall and in a large floor rack. On the opposite side of the room was the three-cell jail block. Steve glanced that way and stared, for all the cell was empty.

"Red Shaeffer's gone," cried Tacy. "He—"

"Was busted out this afternoon." A new voice spoke. *"Careful, Weldon!"*

REASON, as much as the snapped warning, halted Steve midway in a pivot, hand on his gun. Such action was not for now. It could be resorted to only when the last hope was gone. Straightening, Steve completed his turn slowly.

His stomach jerked into a knot. He had recognized Bettger's voice, but he had expected to find the sheriff present also. In-

stead Bettger stood alone beside a huge iron safe, almost his equal in height. There was a Colt's .45 in his right hand, and a self-satisfied smile on his face.

"I figured you to a T, Weldon," he said. "If you were dumb enough to pass up half of 30,000 bucks, you'd be too dumb to give up trying to reach town to spill your piece."

"Where's Sheriff Holman?" demanded Tacy.

"Over in the hotel with a bullet in his right lung," retorted Bettger. "Which puts me in full charge. Now lay those shooting irons on the desk real careful, Weldon. I'd rather not plug you here, but I'll do it if you force my hand. I'd claim you two came to bust Shaeffer out, not knowing his other two pards had beat you to it."

"Nobody'd believe that," cried Tacy.

Bettger lifted an eyebrow. "You still figure they'd believe you two came to give yourselves up—throwing 30,000 bucks away?" he queried derisively.

Steve knew they were caught good. This latest turn of events—Shaeffer's jailbreak and the sheriff's shooting—had placed Bettger in a perfect position to make the truth sound absurd. Still, the end was not yet in sight. Carefully he laid his own gun and the one taken previously from Bettger on the desk as bidden.

The crooked lawman nodded toward a rope on the wall. He said to Tacy, "Since you threw my handcuffs away, you can take that and tie his hands behind him. And do a good job, too. I'll inspect it when you're done."

As the girl set to work reluctantly, Steve said, "How'd you work out this angle, Bettger?"

The latter proved willing to air his cleverness, so long as talk did not delay proceedings. Joining the three possemen, he had pursued Steve and Tacy until they'd met the second party that had sent the fugitives scurrying to cover. From this second party, fresh out of town, he had learned of Shaeffer's rescue from jail by his two unknown confederates.

"One of them is Shaeffer's brother, Pete. The other calls himself Hobble Watts," spoke up Tacy. "They stayed at the Rail M a week before they talked Dad into throwing in with them."

Bettger thanked her ironically for the information and continued his tale. From the newcomers he had learned of Shaeffer's jailbreak, in the course of which Sheriff Holman had been seriously wounded. Realizing that he would have a free hand in the sheriff's office, he had gone there to wait, gambling that his quarry would thus fall into his lap.

Tacy stepped back from Steve. "He's tied."

"Turn this way, Weldon, and back up—slow," ordered the deputy.

Steve obeyed. As the tightness of his bonds was tested, he said, "You still hoping to get off with that loot?"

"Nothing can stop me now," retorted Bettger. "Red Shaeffer and his pals didn't get very far. They were cut off from the hills and had to head north. Red's wound slowed them up, and they're trapped right now on the old Olson place, ten miles out. They're in the barn and I've got enough men surrounding it to keep 'em there until they starve or give up. Meanwhile Tacy will lead me to the money."

"What about Steve?" asked Tacy quickly.

Bettger slanted her a look. "Meaning he's become important to you personally?"

Tacy colored beautifully but refused to be distracted. "How about him," she repeated, "and my dad and Rory Wade?"

Bettger shrugged. "All I care about is laying hands on that 30,000 bucks. Afterward the rest of you hightail out of the country, as far as I'm concerned. Right now we've wasted enough time. We're leaving by the back way. You first, Tacy."

WITHOUT further word the girl headed for the back room. Treading close on her heels, Steve cursed Bettger's astuteness. From the beginning all Tacy had wanted was to reach her wounded father without betraying him to the law. If Bettger had bargained with her thus in the Pass he might have had no

trouble. But then again, perhaps he had and she had turned him down, afraid to trust him. Perhaps now, goaded by fear of her father's time running out, she felt she had no choice. Let what happened afterward be considered then.

It was an attitude Steve could not share. Even if Bettger kept his word and let them go, they would be hunted for the rest of their days. It would always be thought that they had carried off the bank money. That would leave Bettger with a free hand to cache the $30,000 until such time as he could arrange to leave Gunlock in a seeming above-board fashion, thereafter to enjoy the fruits of his scheming without worry or fear.

The mental picture made Steve burn. Damned if he'd let himself be killed or outlawed, in order that a crooked lawman might get away with his crookedness. There was still one way to beat Bettger. One desperate chance . . . .

Before the shed in the back yard Bettger called a halt. Opening the door, he reached inside with his left hand, fumbled a moment, and then led forth a horse that had evidently been tethered within easy reach. Moonlight revealed the animal to be tall and clean-limbed, and it wore complete rigging.

"So you're making free with the sheriff's thoroughbred, too," remarked Tacy tartly.

"The sheriff's in no shape to object." The unruffled retort came. "He can outrun anything in this country. Remember that, Weldon, and don't try what I did this afternoon. Remember that I can shoot you in the back and get away with it. Now we're going to walk quiet-like out of town. I'll lead the horses while you two mosey ahead. Move!"

Steve stepped out obediently, because it suited him to do so. This was not the place to start anything. Townspeople aroused by any kind of disturbance would side Bettger without question. He had to wait until the danger of such interference no longer existed.

"Glad to see you two have decided to play it smart," declared Bettger, when he halted eventually. "Now I'll mount first. Stand clear."

The bay thoroughbred sidled away from him nervously as he lited foot to stirrup. Bettger cursed, followed him with a hop, and made a quick swing into the saddle. He tried to bring his sixgun to bear upon his prisoners simultaneously as his boot toe found the opposite stirrup. He failed both ways. For in the instant that he swung upward Tacy swung into action, too.

Steve heard her yell. Afterward he seemed to remember her arm flying out. At the moment he had only a dim impression of something flying through the air, and then the bay thoroughbred went crazy.

Whinnying shrilly, it reared and began to plunge. Steve heard Bettger's wild bawl of anger and alarm. The ground shook to pounding hoofs. Then Tacy's hand was suddenly at Steve's elbow.

"Hurry!"

STEADIED by her firm touch, he made it into the saddle on his gentler mount easily, despite hands bound behind him. An instant later she was mounted, too, and spurring to his side, reaching frantically for his bridle reins. A knee grip kept him upright as the animal beneath him lunged ahead. He caught the swing in the second jump. Then the sounds of Bettger's battle with a highstrung, frightened mount dimmed and was overwhelmed by the leather-creaking, hoof-pounding tatoo accompanying their flight through the night.

Tacy continued to lead his mount until they entered the hills. There she reined up and attacked the ropes about his wrists.

"Jack-knife—left pocket," he panted.

He stood in the stirrups to enable her to reach the folded blade. Its keen edge freed him quickly. Shaking his hands to restore circulation, he listened for sounds of pursuit. That the bay would throw Bettger and bolt, leaving him afoot, was too much to hope. Steve's last glimpse of the deputy had revealed him sticking well to the animal's humped back. Gradually an unmistakable beat began to grow in the air.

"Let's go!" cried Steve.

Tacy took the lead like a hare before hounds. They would never outrun the thoroughbred. However, the deeper they penetrated rough terrain, the better would be their chances of eluding him and his rider in the darkness.

There was no beaten trail to follow, nor did Tacy seek one. Deliberately she avoided the easier going. Hills grew higher and rougher. Their twistings became more devious. When they were forced at last to halt and breathe their mounts, they had put behind at least a dozen places at which a pursuer might be expected to make a wrong guess.

"Reckon we're safe for a while anyway," said Steve.

The shadows enveloping them lifted as a scudding cloud bank cleared the moon. In the new silvery light Steve saw Tacy clearly. She was bare-headed, her hair a mop of wind-whipped curls. Her sombrero, then, was the object she had hurled to spook the thoroughbred.

"Why'd you do it, Tracy?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I told you the sheriff never let anyone else touch that bay. Strange handling is bound to make a hotblood skittish. You know that." A grim little smile curled her lips. "Bettger should have, too, but a body can't think of everything. He figured the sheriff's horse in the shed would fool us into believing the sheriff was inside. And he thought we wouldn't dare make a break, knowing how much better mounted he was than us."

"That's not what I meant," said Steve. "He'd promised you what you wanted most. What if your attempt to cross him had failed?"

"I had to take that chance," she answered fiercely. "I know him too well. Once he laid hands on that money there's no telling what he'd do. Besides, do you think I could let him get away with the loot while my father dies or goes back to the life of a hunted animal? And you . . . There's only one right way to settle this. That money's got to go back where it belongs—to the bank."

Steve could have shouted. Regardless of

[*Turn page*]

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CLOTHES FOR WORK AND PLAY

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Bill Moore's own sinful ways, he had seen to it that his daughter was reared proper and honest. She had backbone and brains and heart. And in choosing between the right way and the easy way, she had thought of Steve Weldon. Returning the money personally to the bank had been the one remaining hope he had seen when they'd fallen into Bettger's trap in the sheriff's office. It was his last chance to clear himself, and she was for it all the way.

IN EXULTATION Steve leaned toward the girl, took her face between his two hands, and kissed her on the lips. It was meant to be a comradely salute—a token of admiration and gratitude. It turned out to be so much more that afterward they gazed at each other searchingly, breathlessly. Then he kissed her again, while her arms encircled his neck and clung. Steve was happier than ever before in his life, until he remembered something.

"Tacy . . ." he began haltingly. "Rory Wade . . . Bettger said you two were sweet on each other."

Her smile was tender. "I'm twenty-one, Steve. Three years older than Rory. We were never sweethearts. I just mothered him, along with Dad."

Steve knew an immense relief. He tried to cover it with lightness. "In that case, I'll marry you if we ever get out of this fix," he said.

She topped him. "In that case, we'd better get out of it—and fast!"

She spurred her horse on. Grinning, Steve followed. It was amazing how much difference a new outlook made. The grim battle had a touch of glory now. It helped thrust aside the increasing lankness of an empty stomach. It mustered strength for the steep pitches up which horses must be led, not ridden. It bolstered endurance for the hours of travel during which moonlight was replaced with the greyness of dawn. They were deep in a forest by the time the sun came up, and high enough to feel the chill of snow in the air sweeping down from the heights above.

In a grassy glade Tacy reined up. "I—can't go on," she faltered, as Steve rode abreast.

She swayed in the saddle, pale to the lips with fatigue. Having eaten nothing for twenty-four hours, hunger weakness was probably assailing her, too, Steve realized. There was nothing he could do about that. Even if he'd had a gun, he would not dare risk the sound of a shot at a rabbit or grouse.

But they could, and must, rest. Even the horses were beat.

"How much farther?" he queried.

"About three hours."

"Then we'll stop right here a while," he said.

This time he did not watch her sleep. He slept, too, although fitfully and aroused often by the noises of the horses as they moved about on short tethers, stretching their necks to crop every blade of grass within reach. Finally, with the sun straight overhead, restlessness and anxiety made it impossible for him to close his eyes and sleep again.

Rising, he moved to an open spot, and found himself on the edge of a cliff. Above were timber-clad peaks, all dwarfed by two towering, snowy crags that looked like bony clenched fists lifted to the blue sky. The deep V between them probably marked the Pass, he surmised. Below the terrain dropped dizzily, a vast panorama of rock and forest with hardly a tree growing on level ground. Slope after slope blended and overlapped, creating hundreds of canyons and draws out of which horsemen could emerge at any moment. And due to the immense scale of their background, they would be visible to the naked eye only if caught on the move.

Aware of this, Steve spent half an hour searching the rugged landscape with a squinted gaze. He spied something once to the north. It vanished quickly, and only through patient waiting did he pick it out again and satisfy himself that it was a pair of horsemen. They were too far away to worry about yet, Steve told himself. Just the same, it was time to climb on their horses and go on.

SHAKY-KNEED, Tacy had to be helped back into the saddle.

"Just hungry," she said reassuringly. "And there'll be plenty to eat at the cabin. Rory said Dad laid in plenty of supplies, figuring they might have to stay there quite a spell before the search tapered off."

Heading out, she veered away from the Pass. The hideout was nowhere near there, she explained. She had taken Bettger that way merely to mislead him. There was no mysterious route to their destination. It was simply that the vastness and ruggedness of the mountain area made a small log cabin set in a small basin hard to find, without a guide or specific directions. Even at that, if possemen spread out and persisted in the search, the discovery was bound to be made before too long.

Steve said nothing about the two distant horsemen he had seen. Time enough to burden Tacy with that fresh worry when it could no longer be avoided.

Eventually the sun settled to the mountain tops, and pink and lavender hues began to shade its red-gold radiance. Tacy sat straighter in the saddle, peering forward eagerly. At length she drew rein and pointed out a high, rocky cliff ahead to the right.

"That's the old look-out point," she said. "If Rory's watching there, he's seen and identified me by this time. He's liable to jump us from cover, figuring you've forced me to lead you here. Be careful. He might not be in any shape to think straight."

"Lead my horse," said Steve. "I'll put my hands in the air."

Flashing him a look of gratitude and relief, Tacy carried out his suggestion. In this fashion they forged on slowly. The look-out cliff drew close and then loomed overhead. They circled its base and dipped down into a small green basin hemmed in by steep, forest-green hillsides. A tiny rushing mountain stream cut across its middle. Back from it on a knoll stood a cabin, with a corral behind in which there were two horses. No other signs of life were discernible, nor did Rory's expected challenge materialize.

Halting, Tacy turned a pale, tense face to Steve. Heartening words eluded him. He could only lower his arms, take back his bridle reins, and gig his mount on. Silently Tacy tagged him. Presently one of the corraled horses threw up its head and whinnied a welcome.

If there were anyone in the cabin able to move, that would rout them out, reflected Steve.

He called it right. Abruptly the cabin door flew open and a figure brandishing a rifle leaped across the threshold. "That's close enough, mister! I'll blow your head off." The voice, rising shrilly, tapered off on a near-hysterical note.

"Rory," cried Tacy, spurring forward.

Holding to a slow, discreet advance, Steve watched her leap from her saddle and push the rifle barrel aside. Whatever she said to the lone defender took quick effect. He lowered the weapon as though it had required a mighty effort to hold it up. The gesture with which he mopped his face on a shirt sleeve reminded Steve of a small boy wiping away tears.

BUT when he reined up and dismounted, the eyes that sized him up were dry. Rory Wade might have gone into the bank robbery a wild, reckless kid seeking excitement. He still looked wild, but in a hard, wary fashion, and he had aged years.

"Tacy says you're a friend, Weldon," was his greeting. "I don't savvy, but I'll take her word."

"We'll explain later," said the girl. "Right now . . . ." Her voice failed momentarily. Gesturing toward the interior of the cabin, she added huskily, "My dad . . . ?"

Rory started to answer, stopped and stepped aside instead. Tacy darted past him. As the eyes of the two men met, the younger shook his head slowly. Turning, he followed the girl. Steve trod after them.

He paid scant attention to the cabin's single room. Subconsciously he noted that it was comfortably, though crudely, furnished. There was a stone fireplace, table and chairs, and open shelves bearing considerable canned goods. A dreadful sound

of labored breathing, half rasp and half rattle, filled the air. It came from a bunk beside which Tacy had dropped to her knees.

"Dad," she was calling softly. "Dad . . ."

But the man addressed could not hear. Steve doubted that he would ever again hear anything on this earth. An unbuttoned shirt revealed bloody bandages criss-crossing his chest. Gaunt, with sunken, purple-lidded eyes, his face was a death mask.

"How long has he been like this?" Steve asked Rory Wade.

The boy licked dry lips. "Since early this morning. Before that he was wild with fever. I couldn't leave him a minute. I didn't sleep for three days and nights. That's why, when he quieted down, I dropped off instead of standing look-out."

"If I'd got Doc Bowman the night Rory came after me . . ." whispered Tacy. "If I'd pushed everything else aside, maybe—"

But the bandages were loose enough for Steve to take a quick look underneath. He shook his head.

"He never had a chance, Tacy," he said, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Only will power and a strong constitution have kept him hanging on this long."

"He wanted to see Tacy again." Rory swallowed.

"Then maybe he'll come to at least and be able to speak to her," said Steve.

Secretly he entertained no such hope. He had seen this kind of coma once before. He believed Bill Moore would slip away without once opening his eyes. Yet the end might hold off for hours, and the hope that her father's last wish to see her might be granted could help Tacy bear up to the trying vigil ahead.

He found a stool for her to sit on. He brought her food—cold, for they dared not risk smoke from the chimney until after dark—and compelled her to eat it. After the first few bites, a healthy stomach took over to see that its needs were satisfied.

"You might as well sleep a while now," said Steve, nodding towards a second bunk as she set aside her emptied plate. "We'll call you if there's any change."

Tacy shook her head. "I couldn't sleep. I'd rather sit beside him." Gazing at the dying man, she continued softly, "He got into this for my sake. He didn't want to go back to the old life. But he couldn't believe that our being together meant more to me than anything else. He thought he had to get hold of a big sum of money—for me." Her voice broke.

STEVE waited for her to continue. Instead she laid her head on the edge of Bill Moore's bunk and wept silently. Miserable, yet sensing that she might find relief in tears, Steve stepped outside and seated himself on a bench beside the cabin door. In a moment Rory joined him there.

"What did she mean about her father's wanting money for her?" queried Steve.

Rory picked up a stick and began to poke at the ground. "Where do you come in?" he demanded.

Tacy had been too overwrought to make the promised explanation. Steve made it now, describing in detail their chance meeting in the Pass and all that had taken place between them and Bettger since.

Once Rory interrupted harshly. "So that sidewinder's after the bank loot for himself! Hi-jacking is about his style, all right. Well, it's all in greenbacks, and I'd burn the whole works before I'd let him get off with any of it."

Steve knew a flash of hope. "There's a better way to beat him," he said.

Rory surveyed him with narrowed blue eyes. "How?"

Steve drew a deep breath. "By returning the money to the bank."

Rory leaped to his feet. "You're crazy! I've got it and I'm keeping it—my share, anyway. That's half, now. Bill's share goes to Tacy."

His hand rested on his holstered sixgun as though he expected Steve to jump him.

Steve shrugged. "If I wanted to put anything over on you, I'd have made a play for a gun the first thing," he pointed out. "Moore's gunbelt is hanging from a nail at the head of his bunk. I had plenty of chances to lift his .45—or even to grab that rifle you set down in the corner by the door."

Rory relaxed somewhat. "That's right,"

he admitted. "But I don't savvy. . . ."

So Steve explained his position, his past, and his one remaining chance to clear himself so he could count on a future. Wonder, incredulity, and finally suspicion appeared on the younger man's face.

"You're trying to tell me that's what Tacy wants, too?" Rory burst out, after Steve had finished his story. "I don't believe it. She isn't going to give up the stake that'll take her off somewhere she can change her name and live like a lady. That's the only reason Bill went into this bank job. He meant it about going straight. Only he'd made the mistake of putting the last of Tacy's money from her ma into the Rail M, and when he tried to sell it no one'd give him half what it was worth. And he couldn't stand having Tacy looked down on any longer and called an 'ex-con's brat.' Half the bank loot will be enough to give her the chance he wanted her to have, and she isn't going to throw it away—not after he's died for it."

"Tacy wouldn't accept stolen money—not even from her father, if he lived," said Steve. "Bill Moore would have realized that himself, if he hadn't let his love for her mix him up. He must have been half loco to think he could get away with robbing his hometown bank. If he had to do a thing like that, why didn't he pick one a good way off? Then he'd have had a chance to cover up."

"Robbing the Gunlock Bank wasn't Bill's idea," interrupted Rory. "Red Schaeffer was the leader. He and Pete and Hobble Watts come to these parts for that purpose. They used to know Bill in the old days, and they figured he'd jump at a chance to give them the lay-out of the bank and town for a cut of the loot. Bill turned 'em down at first. But they hung around and talked him into it."

"Didn't Tacy get suspicious and try to stop him?"

"Well, she didn't like those three hardcases hanging around. But he promised he wouldn't have anything to do with any of their schemes, and finally he pretended to run 'em off. After that he met 'em in the hills. In working out the details of the job they found three men weren't enough. They needed five. Bill said he'd be suspected of having a hand in it anyway, so he might as well go whole hog. They were to have fresh horses waiting at the Rail M, and he could pick Tacy up at the same time and take her along to the hideout. He asked me if I wanted in, too, and like a damn fool I said yes."

GIVING him a keen look, Steve asked, "If you know you took a wrong trail, why not back-track before it's too late?"

"It's that already," came a bitter answer.

"No, it isn't," argued Steve. "You're only a kid. That'd count for you—especially if you gave yourself up and returned the loot. At worst you'd get a light sentence. And when you came out you'd have nothing to dodge or be afraid of any more."

Rory licked his lips, a look of longing on his face. But it vanished quickly. "You can make it sound good because you've got everything to gain," he said harshly. "But your say-so is no guarantee of what the law and the folks in Gunlock will do. And I'm the one who takes the chance. Nothing doing."

He went back into the cabin. Steve lingered to smoke a cigarette. Rory's first reaction to the idea of giving himself up was a natural one. The fact that it had stirred him to wild hope, however briefly, proved that he was not cut out to be a real outlaw. Let him think about it a while. The seed had been planted. There remained only to see whether it sprouted or died.

With the fading splendor of sunset, shadows gathered quickly. It was dark enough to hide chimney smoke when Steve went inside. He found Rory building a fire on the hearth. There were three windows, one in the back wall and one in front, on either side of the door. Steve arranged pieces of blanket over each to serve as blinds, and he noted, as he turned from the last one, that Rory's rifle no longer stood in the near corner. Bill Moore's gunbelt and holstered sixgun had also been whisked out of sight.

Steve's jaw set, but he said nothing. The dying man's breath was growing shorter.

He could not last much longer, and not until he had passed away and was decently buried could there be any showdown.

Tacy slept on. Steve made a pot of coffee and took up his vigil, fortified by the strong, hot drink. Crouched at the opposite side of the fireplace, Rory stared into the flames and watched him furtively.

So an hour passed, and another. A feeling of desperation began to build up in Steve. Every moment counted against them, bringing closer the inevitable discovery of this hideout cabin. To be apprehended here by true possemen would thwart Bettger's personal designs upon the bank loot, but it would do nothing for Tacy Moore and Steve Weldon. Who would believe that their sole intention had been to return the stolen money? The longer the delay in starting it on its way to Gunlock, the slimmer grew the chances of getting it there safely and clearing themselves.

The practical solution, of course, would be for one of them to set out with it at once. But which one? Tacy was automatically eliminated. Rory could never be talked into undertaking such a mission alone. If he could be, by some miracle, it would be the sheerest folly to depend on him to carry it through. If a chance meeting with possemen did not panic him into some disastrous mistake, he'd be too apt to weaken and light out in another direction. That left only himself, Steve. And he was bound to Tacy's side by reluctance to leave her at such a time, and fear of what could happen while he was away.

MORE than twenty-four hours had passed since their escape from Bettger. In steady travel it had taken them approximately half that time to reach this place. That left an extra twelve hours during which Bettger would not have been idle or sleeping. He had already demonstrated his resourcefulness. He would be straining it to the utmost in order to be the first to find this hideout.

Suppose he succeeded? A kid like Rory would have little chance against him, should he find Rory and Tacy alone with a dead or dying Bill Moore. Bettger had an ugly temper and was obsessed with greed. A realization that the bank loot had slipped out of his hands again, and was at last hopelessly beyond his reach, could goad him to any vengeful lengths. Any other risk was preferable, decided Steve.

Bill Moore died shortly before dawn. After her first outburst of grief Tacy became fatalistically calm.

"We'll bury him beside my mother," she said. "They'd both want that."

On his former sojourns at this cabin Bill Moore's favorite pastime had been prospecting for gold. Steve found a pick and shovel and repaired to a solitary pine Tacy pointed out. Beneath it was a long, grass-covered mound bearing a cedar slab marked simply with dates and a name, Mary Ryan Moore.

At this altitude not all the frost had yet gone out of the ground. Digging was hard. Even with Rory's help, it took two hours to prepare the grave and lay Bill Moore to rest beside the wife who had followed him loyally into a wilderness exile and died there for her devotion. By that time the sun was up. Possemen would have broken their night's camp and be on the move again, reflected Steve. Although hurrying Tacy away might seem callous, it had to be done.

"It's time to get moving, Tacy," he said.

She lifted her bowed head. "Yes. Its all over for my dad, but not for us." Turning to Rory, she added, "I suppose Steve told you how things stand?"

Rory looked uncomfortable. "Yes. But—"

"Then you'll go back to Gunlock with Steve and me?"

Sweat appeared on Rory's forehead. "I can't! A bank clerk was shot. If he's dead—or dies—they'll hang me, maybe without a trial."

"The clerk's all right. Bettger told me he'd only been hit in the shoulder."

"But it would still mean prison—maybe twenty years."

"Three to five is a better guess," cut in Steve. "Even that might be shortened by good behavior."

Tacy said, "Otherwise it means running and hiding like a hunted animal, until someday you end up like this." Her gaze dropped to the mound of fresh-turned earth at their feet.

Rory looked at it, too, his expressinn strained. Yes or no, thought Steve.

But Rory was not forced to make that decision. Suddenly one of the horses corraled behind the cabin whinnied shrilly, and was answered by another further away. Steve whipped about. Every nerve and muscle jumped, for two horsemen had just rounded the base of the look-out cliff and reined to a halt.

"It's Watts and Bettger," burst out Rory incredulously. "They—"

HE NEVER finished. One of the horsemen made a quick move. Steve caught a glint of sunlight on steel. Then a sixgun began to bark in the quiet morning air. At the first report, Steve felt a light fiery touch at the tip of his left shoulder. At that second Rory let out a hoarse cry of surprise, went into a spin, and fell. As gunfire continued to crackle, only the fact that Steve was moving saved him. With a single leap he shoved Tacy into motion.

"Get to the cabin," he shouted.

She ran two steps and stopped. "Rory!"

But Steve was already heaving to his feet with the boy's limp form over his right shoulder. Despite Rory's youth and medium height, he was of stocky build and plenty heavy. Staggering, Steve broke into a lumbering run. He heard popping sounds, above the pound of blood at his eardrums. He saw lead rip up sod inches ahead of him. Suddenly a tremendous force slammed into his left leg and knocked it out from under him.

Looking back, Tacy screamed. Steve heard nothing save the thud of his weight and Rory's hitting the ground. Pain stabbed him through a swirling grey mist. He tried to obey an urge to keep moving. Then a voice sobbed in his ear, and hands tugged at him. Somehow he found himself erect, hobbling on, supported by Tacy's arm and shoulder, his left leg dragging.

The open cabin door beckoned. They reached it and fell across the doorjamb. Steve heard the door slam shut and the bar fall into place.

Then Tacy was kneeling beside him, crying out for his jack-knife.

His left shoulder had been merely bullet burned and did not bleed. The real wound, bared by a slit-open pants leg, was an inch or so above his left knee. It was bleeding badly. Still Steve's mind had cleared enough for him to realize that there was something else to be done equally as important as checking the red flow.

Rory's sixgun remained where the boy had fallen. Tacy would have had no time to take it, even if such a thought had entered her mind. That made them defenseless, unless they could find the weapons Rory had hidden. And they must do so quickly, before Watts and Bettger guessed the seriousness of their predicament.

"Your father's guns," he cried. "Rory cached 'em last night!"

Tacy required no further explanation. Leaping to her feet, she began a frantic search. Steve did not follow its progress. Removing his pants' belt, he looped it about his thigh, above the wound, and jerked it tight to fashion a tourniquet. Sweating, teeth set, he had just managed to fasten it when Tacy uttered a cry.

Since the inside of a small cabin provided few hiding places, it had not taken her long to get around to the extra bunk. After stripping off its blankets she had attacked the pine boughs underneath that served as a mattress. Now, from the dried, aromatic mass, she dragged forth not only weapons and ammunition—Bill Moore's sixgun and cartridge belt, two rifles and several boxes of shells—but also a pair of bulging saddlebags.

A lifted flap disclosed the green of neatly packeted currency. Here in actuality at last was the bank loot, the $30,000 for which many more than Bill Moore were, perhaps, yet to die. Tacy dropped the saddlebags to the floor. Snatching up a rifle, she broke out a front windowpane and fired several shots, to discourage any notion of rushing the cabin.

THE outlaw and the crooked deputy had advanced and taken cover in the creek bottom at the nearest point. From there bullets came whizzing back. A couple thudded into log walls. Another found its way inside, to glance off the stonework of the fireplace with a chilling whine.

A weak burst, thought Steve. Only one gun. One of them, then, must be on the move, hoping to circle the cabin and take them by surprise from the rear. Gripping the edge of the near bunk, he started to pull himself up.

"Be careful," begged Tacy, obviously torn between a desire to fly to his aid and the knowledge that she dared not leave her post even for a moment.

"I'm all right," gritted Steve. "Don't think—that slug—touched the bone."

Standing erect on his sound leg, he fought off a wave of pain and nausea. When it had passed he put his latest fear into words, adding, "You'll have to cover that back window. Shove the table close to me here and I can sit on it and watch the front."

Tacy made haste to comply, then gave him her father's Colt .45 and well-filled cartridge belt. Perched on the edge of the table, with his wounded leg hanging and most of his weight off the other, Steve achieved a fairly comfortable position. He, too, broke out a window pane. The sound drew no fire from the enemy. Instead a flutter of greyish white appeared suddenly against the greenery of willows.

Steve rubbed his eyes, but it proved to be no hullucination. The attackers had lifted a flag of truce. High in the air it rose, knotted to the end of a long stick. Beneath it there emerged, from the wall of green cover along the creek bank, first one figure and then another. Side by side they began to advance slowly into the open.

"Tacy," called out Steve. "You'd better be in on this. Seems we're about to hold a parley."

She joined him at his front window without delay. "That's Hob Watts with Bettger, all right," she said.

She did not wonder aloud how the deputy and the bank robber—last known to be hemmed in by a posse miles away—came to be here now together. Possibly to her the explanation seemed as obvious as it did to him.

When they'd escaped from Bettger into the hills, the deputy must have realized quickly the futility of attempting to recapture them by himself, especially at night. He'd remembered that Watts and the Shaeffers were sure to know the way to the hideout too. Red Shaeffer had been wounded and jailed. All along Bettger had probably figured on making a deal with Red, as a last resort.

The risk of such a move had been practically eliminated by the shooting of Sheriff Holman and by Red's jailbreak. In his capacity as acting sheriff, Bettger could easily have arranged to parley alone with Watts, by that time the lone survivor of the three trapped in the Olson barn. After a deal had been agreed upon between them, there were any number of ways he could have maneuvered Watt's escape.

The crooked deputy and his new confederate continued to advance until Steve lifted his voice.

"That's close enough. Spill your piece from there."

IT WAS Bettger who bore the flag of truce. Unshaven and ragged, short and broad, Watts had the scraggy look of a bear just emerged from a winter's hibernation. He looked just as dangerous as that hungry beast. However, it was Bettger who spoke.

"All we want is the money, Weldon," he said. "Throw those saddlebags to us and we'll pull out."

Steve didn't believe it for a minute. Every risk Bettger had taken so far had been carefully calculated, with the odds all in favor of keeping his guilt concealed. Badly as he wanted to get off with a sizable portion of the stolen money for himself, he wanted to be equally sure the blame would fall on somebody else's shoulders. To high-tail out of the country would expose his crookedness and outlaw him. He'd never do that voluntarily. Once Watts had departed, he'd hide his share of the loot and then hold them here in the cabin until hon-

est possemen arrived. Once more he would have placed himself on the firm, safe ground of his word against theirs.

"Nothing doing," answered Steve.

"Don't be a fool, Weldon." Bettger's voice was urgent. "There's a posse trailing us. They're taking it easy, because Watts came out of the Olson barn with a gun they didn't know was empty at my back, and they think he's keeping me with him as a hostage. But they'll be here in an hour anyway. That'd give us all time to make a getaway if you act fast. And clearing out of the country is the only chance left for you and the girl now. Can't you see that?"

Steve looked at Tacy. With a bullet in his leg he couldn't run if he wanted to. But if she could get out of this. . . .

She guessed the trend of his thoughts and shook her head angrily. "No," she said, "I'm not leaving you to face this alone, especially since I got you into this fix. Anyway, neither of them can be trusted to keep his word. Rory was one of Watts's confederates in that bank robbery, but even that didn't mean anything, did it?"

She was right, at least, to count on nothing but treachery from either of the pair outside, admitted Steve. And if he was not to escape being railroaded back to prison, he could keep Bettger from winning the $30,000.

"All right, Tacy girl," he said. "I'll tell them the answer is still no."

He shifted his gaze back to the waiting pair. But the call rising to his lips was never uttered. Something had happened to Watts and Bettger. No longer was their attention focussed upon the cabin. Half turned, they were gazing westward, and their frozen posture denoted startlement and dismay. Steve heard Tacy's quick intake of breath. Then he became aware of a rhythmic, murmuring sound, rapidly swelling louder. Hoofbeats!

Even as the realization burst upon him, Tacy flew to the opposite window, which afforded an unobstructed view of the westward sweep of the basin to the stand of pine and fir rimming it on that edge.

"Riders!" she cried in an electrified voice. "Four of them! Look!"

By pressing his face to the far side of his window, Steve obtained a slanting view of a group of horsemen, newly emerged from black forest, racing forward across open space. He gave them no more than a glance, for suddenly the two closer figures on foot threw off the paralyzing effect of unpleasant shock.

WATTS'S reflexes, developed through years of living constantly on edge, proved the swifter. Bettger dropped the flag of truce and his hand flashed to his gun. Simultaneously the bank robber's fist lashed out to the deputy's jaw. Watts had reminded Steve of a bear. Further carrying out the analogy, it was as though a grizzly had slapped Bettger with a front paw. Lifted clear of the ground, the crooked lawman landed in a limp, inert huddle several feet away. Instantly Watts broke for the willow-lined creek bank at a lumbering run.

"Why'd he hit Bettger?" queried Tacy blankly, as the thick green growth swallowed him up.

"To keep Bettger from shooting him in the back when he made a run for it," answered Steve.

That part was clear enough. The alliance between Watts and Bettger was one of expedience only. Both would have known the other would turn on him the moment he was of no further use. Yet it was odd that Watts should have used his fist on Bettger instead of his gun. Why?

The speculation was swift and fleeting. Steve forgot it as the four newcomers raced past the cabin. They had appeared from the wrong direction to be the posse trailing Bettger and Watts from the lower country. That meant they were some of the persistent searchers for the hideout cabin who had happened to draw close enough to be guided in by the sound of shooting. They swept past Bettger's stirring figure. Suddenly they began to shoot. Their target was Watts, who had burst, mounted, from the cover of the creek bed and was fleeing northward in a last desperate bid to escape.

He was not to make it. The range was too close for all the bullets whizzing after

him to miss. Abruptly he threw up a hand and pitched out of the saddle. Riderless, his horse raced on. If he were dead, thought Steve, that did it. An honest posseman would have silenced a dangerous witness against Bettger for him.

The irony of this wrenched a laugh from Steve's lips. The laugh turned to a gasp as inadvertently he moved his wounded leg. Searing pain turned him giddy and sick. It was time for the tourniquet to be loosened briefly. He fumbled at the strip of leather looped tightly about his thigh. He heard Tacy cry out his name, but her voice sounded strangely far away. He began to fall and could do nothing to save himself. He never remembered hitting the floor. He plunged instead into a soft blackness that swallowed him up and closed over his head.

Voices were the next thing he heard. The words they spoke were unintelligible, and they ceased when he opened his eyes. He had been packed outside and was lying on the ground. His wounded leg no longer throbbed with pain. It ached steadily, and felt oddly stiff. The latter sensation was due to a well-wrapped bandage, he realized. Attempting to sit up, he got one elbow beneath him, only to have it melt away.

He was aware of a wave of movement close by. Then Tacy dropped to her knees beside him.

"See how weak he is," she cried. "I told you he'd lost too much blood to be moved right away. Rory, too. Do you want to kill them both?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. Wits gathering, Steve observed that there had been a great deal of activity during his period of unconsciousness. Rory lay a few yards away, alive and breathing easily, his right shoulder bandaged as heavily as Steve's leg. As Steve gazed at him, his eyelids lifted and closed quickly. He was feigning unconsciousness now, unwilling as yet to face what must be faced. The change from boy to man was not yet complete.

NEARBY stood a group of saddled horses. Steve recognized the animals from the corral behind the cabin, along with mounts of the possemen. The horse Watts had tried to escape on was there, too, and across its saddle two men Steve had never seen before were lashing the bank robber's obviously dead body.

"Reckon she's right, Lew. No harm in guardin' 'em here a week or so. It'll take longer than that to arrange for their trial anyway."

The voice turned Steve's head the other way. Somewhat apart stood three men. Two were the big, gray-haired man, and the shorter hawk-nosed one, who had ridden past the chokecherry thicket in which Tacy and Steve had hidden two days ago. They were rancher Chet Webster and his foreman, Hank Allen. The third man was Bettger. Over the crooked deputy's left arm was draped a pair of bulging saddlebags.

As the last item registered with a jolt, Bettger spoke. "All right, Chet, if you're willing to accept the responsibility as my duly appointed deputy. And you'd better keep Allen here to help you until I fetch out the Doc. The other boys can go back to town with me now. Reckon three of us is enough to handle Watts's body and the girl, and get this money safe to the bank."

His eyes were sunk deep in his head from nervous strain and loss of sleep. But they held a glitter of suppressed excitement.

Involuntarily Steve reared up on an elbow again, and this time he stayed up. "Have you counted that money?" he queried.

All activity ceased as startled possemen, girl, and crooked deputy alike faced him. Then Chet Webster said, "What are you getting at? We don't know the exact amount taken. But the bank will."

"You'd better count it anyway, here and now," cut in Steve, "because if you don't Bettger will find a way to slip some of it out of the saddlebags before he reaches town. Then we'll be blamed for stashing away what's missing, too."

Fury leaped into the crooked lawman's eyes, making plain to Steve the accuracy of his guess. Bettger was nursing just such a last lingering hope.

"Don't let him put that over on you and your boys, Webster," continued Steve,

urgingly. "He's been after the loot for himself all along."

Bettger found his tongue. "That goes to show what a tricky lot they are, Chet," he said, shaking his head. "Better not figure Weldon and Wade are harmless on account of the shape they're in. Watch 'em close."

Turning to the pair he had selected to accompany him and Tacy to town, he added, "We'd better get started, boys. Reckon Chet and Hank can handle getting the wounded prisoners inside."

Motioning Tacy toward the horses, he started forward himself. Suddenly Webster spoke up.

"Wait a minute, Lew. It might be a good idea to count that money first, at that."

Bettger bristled with feigned outrage. "You believe I'd . . . Use your head, man. I've been Holman's chief deputy for two years. I'm acting sheriff now, in charge here."

"It's not that any of us doubt your honesty, Lew," argued the ranchman. "It's for your own sake. If the money isn't counted, with us as witness, and there should be some missing, there'll always be some who'll wonder and whisper. No sense taking such a risk just outa fool pride, is there? Especially when it could ruin your chances of stepping into the sheriff's boots permanently, if Holman doesn't pull through."

BETTGER did not reply immediately. Steve could sense the struggle waging inside him. He believed that Bettger would never take any open risk to satisfy his greed, that in the final choice he'd give up his designs on the money rather than permit his crookedness to be exposed. It turned out that he was right.

"Count it, then," said Bettger bitterly, and threw the saddlebags at Webster's feet.

The other possemen formed a half circle behind the ranchman, as the latter crouched and dumped the contents of each leather pouch upon the ground. The total amount came closer to $35,000 than $30,000. Going down on one knee, Bettger began to help stow the packets of currency away again. He said nothing. But Steve noted his quickened breathing and the trembling of his hands.

"So Tacy and I lose, Bettger," he said sardonically. "But you've lost too, haven't you? And for the rest of your life you'll curse the lack of guts that let your big chance slip away. Too bad."

Bettger's head snapped up, breath whistling through his teeth. For a moment all his greed and fear and desperation were revealed starkly on his face, so starkly that Webster was moved to speak with a frown.

"I don't savy, Lew. Why does he keep making accusing cracks at you?"

"Hasn't Tacy told you our story?" Steve broke in.

"I tried," spoke up the girl. "But no one would listen."

"You can talk all you please later," said Bettger. "Right now there's no use wasting time."

But Webster disagreed, an odd look on his face. "Weldon's cracks aren't all that's puzzling me now," he said. "Reckon it'd be a good idea to clear both points up, pronto, like we did the money count."

Bettger might be acting sheriff with an official right to make the decisions, but Webster had a forceful personality, and his authoritative air could not be set aside. Again the crooked deputy was forced to yield lest, in refusing to do so, he transform a relatively minor issue into a dangerous one.

So Tracy at last was given a chance to tell her story and Steve's in detail from the beginning. The unhesitating, straightforward manner of the telling seemed to impress the possemen, for uncertainty and puzzlement appeared in their faces. When she had finished, however, Bettger merely shrugged.

"Naturally they're going to try to pass the buck to someone else," he said. "They picked me because I was the first one here —the likeliest prospect. Weldon might not have taken part in the bank hold-up, but he threw in with Tacy Moore for a cut of the loot afterward. How they really got together is anybody's guess and not very important, I'd say."

"How come Watts wasn't inside the cabin with them?" queried Webster. "If he was your prisoner, how come you didn't fetch a posse along when you made him lead you here after the rest of the gang?"

That Watts should have been Bettger's prisoner, instead of ally, was a natural mistake, realized Steve. To anyone with no reason to suspect the lawman's crookedness, the likeliest explanation of his and Watts's presence together outside beneath of flag truce would be that Bettger had tried, through his one prisoner, to persuade the others holding out in the cabin to surrender themselves.

Bettger's answer was prompt and smooth. "There was a posse trailing us. It should be here any minute now. They held back for my safety, because Watts wasn't my prisoner. I was his—a hostage."

STEVE'S heart began to speed its beat as the crooked lawman described how he had gone alone to parley with the bank robbers trapped in the Olson barn; how Watts, the lone survivor, had surprised and gotten the drop on him, then forced his way through the encircling line of possemen by holding a gun to his, Bettger's, back.

Bettger had to stick to that story. But, in doing so, he had tripped himself up at last. Memory of something Bettger had said under the flag of truce blazed in Steve's mind. Referring to the former beseigers of the Olson barn trailing them, Bettger words had been, "Watts came out . . . with a gun they didn't know was empty at my back . . ." Suddenly Steve knew why the firing at the cabin had seemed to come from only one gun, why the pair had not separated to cover both the back and the front. He knew why Watts had had to use his fist on the deputy when he'd started his last futile attempt to escape.

"He's a black-faced liar," said Steve. "I couldn't prove it before, but I can now."

Bettger stiffened. The three possemen moved back a step as Webster heaved himself erect from his crouch. "How?" he queried.

"If Bettger had been a prisoner and hostage as he claims, would Watts have let him keep his gun? It was the other way around. Bettger arranged Watts's getaway for half the loot. He faked that hostage play for a cover-up. He said himself the gun Watts had held at his back was empty. He kept it that way because he was afraid to trust Watts. But Watts didn't trust him, either, any more than he had to. When you boys showed up, both knew their game was finished. Watts slugged Bettger to keep him from shutting his mouth with lead. It was the only thing he could do, because Bettger had a loaded gun and he didn't."

"He's crazy! It's a pack of lies!" burst out Bettger. "Watts had my gun stuck in the waistband of his pants. It popped out when he hit me. You all went to him first. You know I was on my feet before you got back to me. When I saw my gun lying on the ground, naturally I picked it up. And naturally it's loaded."

"But the one you had Watts pack for show isn't, and hasn't been," retorted Steve. "Take a look, somebody."

Webster made the first move. He strode to the corpse lying face downward across a saddle. The outlaw's sixgun was still in its holster. Removing it and breaking it open, Webster held the result out for everyone to see. Every chamber was empty.

Webster said in a hard voice, "I was the first to reach Watts. He wasn't dead yet. He mumbled a few words I didn't say anything about because they didn't make sense. Something about Bettger shooting Pete Shaeffer in cold blood. Now. . . ."

But if the ranchman did not fully understand, the crooked deputy did. His face had turned grey. Suddenly he made a swift backward leap and a swifter draw.

"I'm clearing out," he said hoarsely. "Move over here, all of you, away from the horses."

Caught flat-footed, Webster, the three possemen, and Tacy were forced to obey.

Steve said, "Then it's true? Pete Shaeffer turned down your deal because Red couldn't travel any further and he wouldn't leave his brother. He tried to keep Watts from accepting it, too, so you shot him."

"No!" cut in Bettger. "Red was already

dead. Pete was hard hit. He'd have died anyway, but he might have talked first. I couldn't allow that, so I had to finish him off."

HE WAS backing toward the horses as he spoke. The money-filled saddlebags were over his left arm again, but Steve had a feeling that he had forgotten them and what they contained. Only one emotion drove him now, fear and the need to save his neck. To do so he'd kill again and again without hesitation or qualm, for now he had nothing to lose.

Aware of this, the possemen stood frozen. He would mount one horse, stampede the others, and make his escape. Nothing could stop him, thought Steve. There was nothing between him and the horses save Rory, lying still in apparent unconsciousness.

A light burst in Steve's brain. Because Rory was not unconscious. He had come to in plenty of time to have heard everything that was said. He could not help but understand the situation. Forgetting to breathe, Steve watched Bettger's retreating steps carry him closer to the still figure on the ground. He drew abreast. Now, if ever, was the time for a boy to become a man.

"Rory!" shouted Steve. He did not realize he had spoken until he heard his own voice. It had been an unconscious plea, a prayer. And Rory did not ignore it.

Catching a movement out of the corner of his eye, Bettger half turned with a convulsive start, the bore of his sixgun whipping sidewise and down. But Rory's right shoulder slammed into his knees at that precise moment. The .45 went off, driving a slug into the ground. Rory's sound arm wrapped around Bettger's left leg and held on, throwing the deputy further off balance. He fired again into the air. Floundering, cursing, he sought to bend and strike at Rory with the barrel of his gun.

It was action that consumed little more than a second, yet it was diversion enough to bring other weapons leaping from their sheaths. Two shots rang out almost in unison. Bettger spun around, tried vainly to speak, and then fell on his face.

It was doubtful whether he would live to hang, Webster told Steve and Tacy later. But it didn't matter, now that the truth had come out. Although Rory would have to stand trial, he could count on considerable leniency from any judge and jury.

"The kid talked a lot before he passed out this last time from starting his wound bleeding again," continued Webster. "He told us what drove Bill Moore into that bank robbery, when he really wanted to go straight. Reckon a lot of us Gunlock folks hadn't realized how shoddy and mean we'd been. If you want to sell the Rail M, I'll give you a fair price for it. But if you figure you'd like to stay and give us another chance, I think I can promise you'll find things a lot different. Think it over, Miss Tacy."

When they were alone again, Steve said, "What do you want to do?"

"Let's stay, Steve," she said. "No one can run away from his past. My dad proved that. The only thing to do is live it down. Maybe that won't be as easy here as Webster thinks, but together we can do it."

She was not blindly optimistic. She knew that his prison record, coming to light eventually, would do nothing to smooth the road ahead. She knew there were always a few people less than charitable. But she knew, too, that the striving would be worthwhile, so long as they had each other.

"That's good enough for me," said Steve, and kissed her.

A Very Merry Christmas
and a Happy New Year
from all of us...to all of you!

The Littlest Lamb

"The good shepherd always cares for his sheep," José said. "So it must have been on the first Christmas . . ."

SUPPER was on the stove and spoiling. Four-year-old Bud, who had to be fed early and often, sat in cotton-headed majesty at the oilcloth-covered kitchen table, diminishing a bowl of mush and milk. He was humming tunelessly but happily as he ate. A child, Penny told herself, was resilient enough to adjust himself to anything. Bud had no tensions. Penny was fighting a growing, rebellious tightness.

She stepped to the back gallery. The sun had been down half an hour, and autumn twilight flowed like a purple tide up the long valley, deepening in the scrub cedar of the box canyons, paling to lavender along the sagebrush and greasewood freckled hill slopes that reached toward the

"A Christmas tree!" Bud shouted. "I want it right here!"

A Christmas Story of the Rangeland

by

Allan R. Bosworth

Rio Grande. It was beautiful and yet forbidding; the colors shaded off into vague and empty depths that came too near matching Penny's mood.

Sancho, the pet dogie lamb, went around the house and across the gallery with a series of stiff legged jumps that rattled the pans on the stove. Penny could hear the quavering, dissonant medley of the sheep as Luke and José brought them up toward the tank and the corrals, letting them stop to graze. It will take them another hour, she thought, and by then Bud would be in bed. He seldom got to see his father any more.

"Mamma, can I play with Sancho after supper?"

Penny closed the screen door. "I'm afraid it'll be too late for little boys like you," she answered. But it wasn't only that. The hand-raised lamb had grown so big he could easily knock Bud into the dirt tank.

Bud put down his spoon. "I want to hear the Long Ranger," he announced.

That terror of evildoers was always the *Long* Ranger to him, and Penny sighed. The child didn't know what "lone" meant.

"The radio needs new batteries, Bud. Daddy will get some—if he ever goes to town."

She lighted a kerosene lamp, and Bud watched her solemnly. "Old Whistle Britches Carr has a radio," he observed.

"Bud, you mustn't call your grandfather that! His radio plays because he has a a power plant down at the big ranch."

"Old Whistle Britches Carr, Whistle Britches Carr," Bud chanted gleefully. "That's what José calls him. José says he's Santa Claus."

"Well, he's not," Penny said firmly. "And I'll have to speak to José. He told you that because your grandfather wears corduroy pants and has a white moustache. You drink your milk, now."

She went through the front room and out into the yard. There was a crispness in the air, and killdees ran crying along the bank of the dirt tank, yonder where the windmill stood like a stilt-legged skeleton against the fading sky. Luke and José were driving the sheep into the wolf-proofed half-section trap, now, moving faster than Penny had expected.

She didn't understand why they had to go to all this trouble. She was sure that the sheep could take care of themselves, and all you had to do was to turn them out where there was grass. And not understanding about sheep had made it all the harder for her to understand the rift between Luke and his father.

PENNY was city bred. She had met and married Luke in the last months of the war, when he was still in the Navy. He had saved all his pay and, even after being separated from the service, he had taken a job in California and scrimped and saved for three more years—all because he was determined to come back to West Texas with enough money to buy himself a little bunch of sheep.

They had arrived in the Big Bend country only last spring, and she sensed that Luke's father did not approve of the delay in getting there. He was a widower, operating the big ranch forty miles from town, with several herders and sheep running into the thousands. He had wanted Luke to stay there and help manage the place, but Luke was restless for a flock of his own.

Luke worked for his father, though, till one sultry morning—she recalled that it was the thirty-first of July—when Mr. Carr had ridden up from the pasture in a temper.

"How in hell did those two bucks get into the south trap last night?" Penny had heard his shout floating up from the corrals, where Luke and José were doctoring a bunch of wormy ewes.

Luke had straightened, corral dust smeared into the sweat that mottled his dark, lean face. "Went under the fence," he explained mildly, slapping at a swarm of gnats. "José and I were driving a bunch of thirty-odd bucks back from the dipping vat, holding them along the fence line. We came to a gullied-out spot, and those

two old scalawags got down on their knees and scooted under the wire before we could stop them."

"Well, why didn't you get 'em out?" Mr. Carr demanded.

"Look, Dad, we tried. By the time we got off our horses and climbed over that fence, they were taking off through the mesquites on the run. It was getting dark. We looked for them for more than an hour."

"That is right," José said loyally. Almost as old as Mr. Carr himself, he was a leathery man with the music of Mexico in his talk, and an extremely wise and expressive face.

Mr. Carr got down from his horse and limped over to the gate as if his boots were hurting. Both he and Luke had stubborn streaks in them a yard wide. Penny was puzzled by what harm could possibly have been done just because a couple of rams got away from the bunch, but Mr. Carr wasn't going to forget the matter.

"It means a bnnch of off-season lambs," he complained. "You ought to know how Merinos are. You ought to know that you don't necessarily have to wait until September or October to breed Merino ewes—not if you happen to have a few cool nights. Time you've been around sheep as long as I have, you'll be a sheep man!"

"Come to think of it, I have been around sheep about as long as you," Luke flared. "The way I remember it, you were punching cows when I was Bud's size."

"Makes no difference," growled the older man. "It's a hell of a way to run a sheep ranch."

Luke put down the can of lime he was using to dust the ewes' fly-blown sores. "All right," he said. "There are about three hundred ewes in that trap. Happens to be just about the size of the bunch I can buy at the market price. You want to sell?"

"Sell? What for?"

"So you won't have to worry about those off-season lambs. I can move into the old Johnson place. Let's go up to the house and I'll write you a check."

"Do not be in a hurry about this, Luke," José counseled earnestly. "Nothing much has happened, and—"

"Nobody asked you to move," Mr. Carr said, a little contritely.

"I'm my own man," Luke retorted. "I'm moving."

HE HADN'T consulted Penny, and that hurt. Even if she knew nothing about the sheep business, she felt she should have been asked before Luke loaded the battered old pickup truck which belonged to him, and brought her to what was to be their new home. It was fifty miles deeper into the Big Bend, ninety miles from a postoffice.

José had come along with them, apparently because he felt that the blame was partly his for letting the bucks get away. And now José seemed to be ridiculing Mr. Carr in Bud's hearing. Penny wasn't going to stand for that. Just because two grown men acted like children themselves—

The back screen door slammed, and Penny forgot all about the four-months-old quarrel. Bud would be in some kind of mischief. She hurried through the house, and was just in time to see the child feeding Sancho the last leaf of the calendar that had hung by the stove.

"Oh, Bud," she cried in exasperation, "there's not another calendar on the place." She seized the broom and sent the lamb bleating through the door.

"Sancho likes paper," Bud said, as if that justified everything.

Penny stood in the doorway a moment, watching the thickening shadows. The sheep were coming on up to the corrals, lifting their monotonous, incessant, quavering chorus, and she put her hands over her ears as if the sound could no longer be borne with sanity.

The calendar, she thought dully, trying to remember when she had looked at it last. One day was like another down here. Thanksgiving was how many days back—two weeks, or more? Luke had forgotten it; he had worked, as usual. So it would be along in December, now—December

the something. A sudden lost, panicky feeling seized her.

I don't even know what day it is, she thought. Even Robinson Crusoe knew that.

She sank into a chair by the kitchen table and began to cry.

Luke found her there a few minutes later. He came in the kitchen door and said, "Honey, have we got any more castor oil? I—why, what's the matter?"

Penny sobbed.

"Sancho ate up the calendar," Bud said helpfully, stroking his mother's arm.

"Well, that bad old Sancho!" Luke grimaced, patting Penny's shoulder with awkward tenderness. "Maybe I ought to give him the castor oil, instead of that stretchy ewe. What's really the matter, honey?"

"I don't know," Penny wailed. "Everything." She looked up and saw him through a watery blur. "And isn't that enough? Do *you* know what day it is?"

"You're tired," Luke said. "It's Wednesday, I reckon—no, it must be Thursday. Doesn't make a bit of difference, down here."

"Maybe not to you, but I'd like my child to know when it's Sunday, even if he can't go to Sunday school. And he's certainly going to have a Christmas this year."

"Of course." Luke grinned. "Just turn on the radio, and you can tell. They'll say it's so many shopping days till Christmas."

Penny wiped her eyes, too angry to cry any more. She said, "If you ever spent any time in this house, you'd know the batteries have been dead for at least two or three weeks."

Luke blinked at her. Bud had caught a word, and was jumping up and down. "I want a Christmas tree, I want a Christmas tree," he shrilled. Luke sat down and took the boy on his lap.

"Why, sure," he said. "I'll find a nice cedar, and I reckon we can decorate it. That tobacco José chews comes wrapped in tinfoil."

"I take it you're not going to town between now and Christmas—whenever that is," Penny said coldly. "If you did, you'd have to pass your father's place."

"That has nothing to do with it, and you know it," Luke retorted, flushing. "I've got forty-nine pregnant ewes to take care of, and it could blow up a norther any day. I aim to come out of this with at least fifty good lambs."

"Then spend Christmas with your precious sheep." Penny flung the words at him. "I'm not going to see Bud disappointed. I can drive the truck. I'll take him to town. The McAllisters would be glad to have us there for Christmas."

Luke's hand went over his face in a gesture of weariness. He had a stubble of beard, and his eyes were bleak. "I reckon I couldn't stop you," he said slowly.

THEN he went out. She heard his boots along the gallery as he got the lantern. She wavered for a space over the thought that, after all, this quarrel was just as silly as the one he'd had with his father; and her heart cried out that he *could* stop her, because she loved him. But there was her pride, too, and she had taken a stand against loneliness, against being buried like this, against being cut off from the world without even a telephone. So she waited . . . a little too long. Luke was going on to the corrals.

It's not like leaving him and going home to mother, she told herself defensively. She stepped to the door, and heard the sheep, and saw the lonesome shadows gathering for the night. Leaving him once would make it easier to leave him the next time. A family should spend Christmas together—Christmas, above all other days.

But just then Bud said, "Will I see Santa Claus, Mommy?" and she picked him up and hugged him, and made up her mind.

"Yes, you'll see him, honey," she said. "You just be patient a few days. . ."

Tomorrow and tomorrow were dateless, and monotonously alike, and now there was a strain at the supper table that went beyond Luke's weariness. He and José did all the talking. It was time, it seemed, to

separate the pregnant ewes from the rest of the flock, lest they be injured by crowding and made to cast their lambs. Penny listened with a scornful ear. Luke was being so solicitous his attitude toward the ewes was little short of maternal. She doubted that he had worried as much about her, before Bud was born.

Surely somebody would come riding along the ranch road—someone who knew what day it was. But nobody did. The road ended here; back of the leased range were the wild, pale Chisos Mountains, and beyond them was Mexico. If anyone wanted to go to Mexico he could follow a paved road down from Marfa to Ojinaga;

"For Heaven's sake, stop whispering!"

there was no occasion for coming this way.

Bud woke one morning remembering the Christmas tree, which Luke hadn't time to cut. He sat on the floor in his pajamas and thumbed a magazine until he found a picture of Santa Claus.

"Mommy," he said, "José fibs. Old Whistle Britches Carr isn't Santa Claus, is he? Old Whistle Britches Carr hasn't got this." He indicated Santa's luxuriant beard.

Penny snatched the magazine away and lured him to the table for breakfast. Then she marched out to confront José, who had been greasing the windmill.

"Look here, José," she began, "I want you to stop letting Bud hear you call Mr. Carr Old Whistle Britches. Do you understand? And stop telling him Mr. Carr is Santa Claus. He'll be disappointed enough."

José removed his flopping hat, which was spattered with sheep dip and windmill oil, and gave her a lazy, white-toothed smile. "But, Señora, we are only having the fun. Bud don' remember last Christmas. So, when he ask me what Santa looks like, *I* say—"

"Yes, you said like Whistle Britches Carr. It would have been better to let him forget Christmas. Nobody even knows when it is."

"Oh, we will know, I think," José said mysteriously.

"Have you got a calendar?"

"No, Señora."

"Well, how will you know, then?"

José twisted the hat in his gnarled hands and looked embarrassed. "This I cannot tell you, Señora," he said. "But Luke will know when this day comes. Of a truth, Señora. Luke knows."

"Oh, he does, eh?" Penny exclaimed. "Well, let him keep his little secret, if that's the way he feels! José, I want you to fill the gas tank of the pickup for me. I'm going to take Bud to town."

"Oh, yes, Señora," José said. "But there is a leak in the tire. This I must fix. But not this morning, because the sheep—"

"The sheep," Penny mocked. "It's *always* the sheep."

José nodded gravely, and his voice was gentle. "Yes, Señora. When you have sheep, it is always, even at Christmas. I think it must have been this way even on the first Christmas."

HE SADDLED, and rode into the pasture. Penny inspected the truck, which was seldom used, and found no evidence of a leaking tire. She went angrily back to the house and packed. Tomorrow she would get an early start.

Luke and José were later than usual that evening, and very tired. José watched her thoughtfully over coffee and a cigarette, then looked at Luke.

"You have plans to cut the Christmas tree?" he asked.

"Got one picked out," Luke said absently. "There's a ring around the moon tonight. Norther coming, sure as you're born."

He was asleep the moment he slumped into bed, but Penny lay long awake, her thoughts racing. The sheep bleated and snuffed; the bellwethers moved about uneasily, and once she heard a coyote on some far rimrock. Then she slept, and woke cold to find Bud whimpering.

She got up to put another blanket on his bed.

The wind was up on a high, lonesome note, and the windmill whirred and rattled its rods. She looked out the window to see that ring around the moon, but it was down. There was faint gray light in the east, and a scud of fast-flying clouds drove down the sky. She went into the kitchen to start the coffee, and found a penciled note on the table.

> I will hurry back fast to help with the sheep, but it is better to get some Christmas things for the muchacho than for spending the Christmas away from home.
>
> José

Luke came suddenly to the kitchen. "Listen," he said, cocking his ear toward the corrals. "Hear that?"

"Did you put José up to this?" Penny demanded.

"Three, maybe four of them," Luke said, grinning. "We'll have our hands full today." Then he turned on her. "Put José up to what?"

"Taking the pickup so I can't go to town."

"I sure didn't," Luke said, reaching for his hat. "I never would have sent him away just when the lambs began to drop. I won't have time for any breakfast right now, honey."

He went on hurriedly, and she set dully to work kindling a fire in the stove. José was a meddler. He had helped bring all this about, and now he had made it worse. Now she was stranded here, where Christmas would be just another day. But as soon as she could leave this place—

The door jerked open, and Luke entered with a long-legged, knobby-kneed newborn lamb in his arms. "Believe it or not, it's snowing," he announced. "This little feller got separated from his milk supply on the north side of the corral. He's chilled through."

"What are you going to do with him?" Penny demanded.

"Warm him up, then make his ma adopt him," Luke said. "Get me a blanket. We'll put him right under the stove. You might feed him a few teaspoons of warm canned milk."

He hurried out again. Now I even have to live with them, Penny thought. She looked at the homely little creature with repugnance, and then he stirred and uttered a thin, quavering bleat.

"All right," Penny said in resignation, and reached for a can of milk and a saucepan. Sancho, the earlier counterpart of the lamb under the stove, came bouncing to the back door for his own breakfast. He had been lucky enough to be born in the spring, and looking at him, Penny knew what Mr. Carr had meant by off-season lambs. . .

BY AFTERNOON, she knew many other things. It was still snowing, a flinty, stinging, sleet-like snow that bounced off the bare places and clung to the grass roots. The first chilled lamb had thawed out and was finally adopted by his own mother, but now there were two others in the kitchen, and Luke was bringing a ewe to the storeroom off the back gallery.

"You'll have to help me with this one," he called. "It's a breech presentation—the little devil's arriving hind end first. If we don't hurry, he'll suffocate."

"Luke, I can't—" Penny began, and then gave up. "All right, what do I do?"

He put the ewe on its back, and showed Penny how to stand astride her and lift the hind quarters while he straightened out the lamb's legs and expertly delivered it. Penny stared. The lamb was a bright orange color.

"That'll change in a few hours," Luke

said. "Come on, now, old gal—mother up, here."

He went back to the corral. Penny was becoming interested in spite of herself. She bundled Bud up, and started out with a thermos bottle of coffee for Luke, only to meet him bringing up another lamb, the smallest and weakest of them all.

"Is it always like this?" Penny demanded through chattering teeth. "I mean, if lambs come in cold weather?"

"Ranches this far south aren't fixed for cold-weather lambing," Luke explained. "We usually have them drop late in February or early in March, and very seldom have this problem. Places like Idaho and Montana—they've got lambing sheds."

Penny nodded. She was glad it wasn't always like this. But it was apparent that the tiny creature Luke was carrying was very near death.

"Let me take him," she urged. "What shall I do with him?"

"Open the oven door, wrap him up, and put him right on it," Luke said. "He needs a lot of heat. And a slug of hot milk will help."

"Can't you bring his mother up to the kitchen?" Penny asked. "The other one seems to be doing well."

"This one hasn't got a mother any more," Luke said. "Something went wrong. She's dead."

Penny reached out her arms. "You poor little orphan!" she crooned. "I'll take care of you. You see that big Sancho? Some day you'll be that big, too."

"He's my lamb," Bud announced, running ahead to open the door. "I'll feed him. Can I feed him some milk, Mommy?"

Luke gulped a cup of the hot coffee, and stood looking out at the storm. The snow was softer, now, and beginning to drift across the low places. Penny read his thoughts.

"I'm sorry I complained about—about Christmas," she said softly. "If I hadn't, José wouldn't have gone."

"Yes, he would have, too," Luke said quickly. "He had it in mind all the time. Only thing is, he hasn't got any chains for that truck, and he won't make it back tonight if the snow keeps on."

He patted Penny's shoulder and went back to the corral, leaning against the wind. She nursed life back into the half-frozen

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JOHN WAYNE

little lamb on the oven door, and made several trips to the corrals to help Luke. Darkness fell. He worked by lantern light until his hands were stiff with the cold, and then came wearily to the house.

"I reckon the worst is over," he said. "There'll be a few to handle tomorrow, but most of the time they arrive right on schedule. How's the little one doing?"

Penny pointed. The smallest lamb had progressed from the oven door to a corner by the stove. It was still too weak to stand, but Bud was busy feeding it another couple of teaspoons of warm milk, and the lamb probably would live.

"Young things are a lot tougher than anybody realizes," Luke said, and then he got up suddenly. "I have one more thing to do."

"Surely you don't have to spend the night with them," Penny protested.

"No," he said, and grinned mysteriously.

HE WENT out, then, and Penny wrapped up the little lamb in a heated blanket, and got Bud to the table for his own supper. Just then Luke came through the door, grinning again, and carrying a six-foot cedar.

"Happy Christmas Eve," he said. "Where do we want this?"

"A Christmas tree—a Christmas tree!" Bud shouted. "I wanted it right here!"

"We'll put it in the front room," Penny decided. She looked at Luke suspiciously. "But how do you know whether it's Christmas Eve or not? José told me that you could tell, but—"

Luke opened his mouth to answer, and then closed it again. There was a truck outside, grinding its way up the slope despite the slippery snow, and the motor didn't sound like that in the old pickup. He stepped to the door and held the lantern high. Penny joined him.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" Luke breathed, slipping his arm around her waist. "I believe that's Dad."

It was José who jumped down from the cab first, and came into the lantern light with his white-toothed smile. He said, "Like I tol' you, I went to get some Christmas things, and—"

"Happy Christmas Eve!" boomed a voice, and Penny stared. The other man getting out of the truck wore a Santa Claus suit and carried a bulging sack. He yelled, "Where's that boy? He been a good boy?"

"Here I am," Bud answered, unafraid of his record. "I got a Christmas tree. I got a baby lamb. I got—"

"You got a sheep man for a daddy, I guess," Santa Claus said. He came across the gallery into the light. "I reckon we all make mistakes, and Christmas time being what it is, you know—I mean it's the season for good will, and—"

"You're kind of mixed up," Luke laughed, and they shook hands, and when Santa Claus hugged Penny she knew the quarrel was really over.

Then Santa strode forward briskly. "Show me that Christmas tree, boy!" he boomed.

Bud stood where he was, listening. There was a faint squeak and swish of corduroy trousers under the long red coat. "Old Whistle Britches Carr!" Bud yelled. "Santa *is* Old Whistle Britches Carr."

Penny said, "Bud, didn't I tell you—" and then stopped there, because Old Whistle Britches Carr had scooped Bud up in his arms, and was making it very plain that he loved the nickname. She turned on Luke. "It really must be Christmas Eve," she said. "How did you know?"

"I remembered the date those bucks got loose," Luke said. "You add a hundred and forty seven days to that, and you've got Christmas Eve. Only I was so busy I nearly forgot again."

"Merry Christmas Eve, everybody!" Santa shouted, and carried his grandson into the front room to drop his sack beside the cedar. "Come on and let's decorate this boy's tree."

Penny heard a rustle in the corner, and looked back. The littlest lamb was getting up on its feet, and she knew everything was going to be all right—this Christmas and all the Christmases to come.

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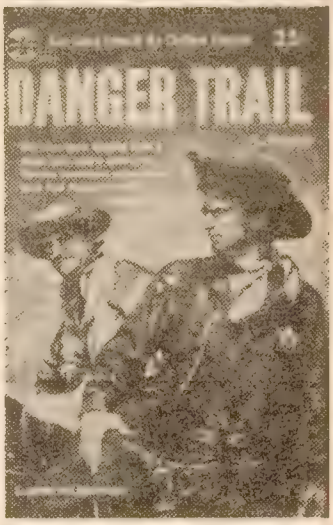
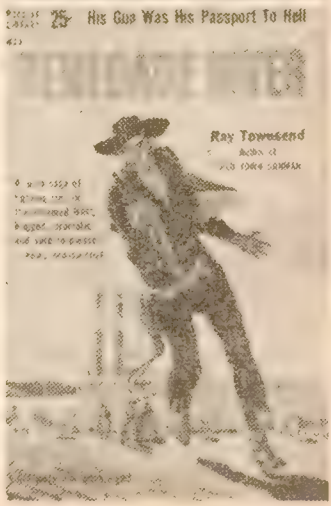




DAN LOGAN WANTED to be repaid for the years he spent in jail . . . but he couldn't take payment from a woman

THERE on the timbered slope he lay in wait, with the patience of a man for whom time had no meaning. He watched a cluster of buildings below him, a ranch headquarters, but occasionally let his gaze sweep the vast surrounding range for riders.

Now, toward sundown, smoke rose from one of the stone chimneys of the big ranchhouse—the kitchen chimney at the rear—and he knew that the woman, who was alone down there, was starting to prepare supper. The question that ran through his mind was, For herself and nobody else?

It was now time for the outfit's riders to be coming

Rider from

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

Hell

in, but there was still no sign of them. There had been no men around the place all day; at least not since mid-morning, when he, the watcher, took up his position on the pine-studded slope. He could not believe that she would be left alone at night in this wild, lonely Montana back country. She was not the sort of woman men would neglect, and surely, he reflected, she meant much to one of the men who lived at the ranch.

He'd seen her outside the house several times during the day. Once she'd put some wash up on a line. Again she'd worked for an hour hoeing in a patch of garden behind the fine log-and-stone house. Each time he'd caught her in the telescopic sight mounted on his rifle. The sight was one of his follies; he'd bought it from a dude sportsman in Cheyenne a month ago. It was a fine instrument.

It had brought her up close, revealed her as young and attractive—almost beautiful, in fact.

He'd felt a bit guilty about spying on her like that, especially when she was busy in the garden and the wind had toyed with her richly black hair and pressed her dress against the curving outline of her full figure. He'd wondered about her all day. He wondered about her now, wondered if she belonged to the owner of the ranch, John Creighton.

As he thought of the man named John Creighton, hatred hardened his face. It was not an unattractive face, but it lacked humor, and was marked by more years than he had lived. He was not yet thirty, but he looked much older.

He had lost nearly eight years because of John Creighton, wasted them away in prison.

The sun was finally down behind the distant mountains. Smoke no longer puffed from the rear chimney. She had made supper and was eating it alone. That seemed to mean that no man was coming there tonight. He, the watcher, whose name was Dan Logan, but who had been merely a number for a long time, had wasted another day.

He cursed thickly.

HUNGER gnawed at his belly, but he had no urge to go to his camp over the hills and rustle up his own supper. He suddenly decided that he should let John Creighton feed him tonight, that he could let Creighton's woman—if she were that—fix him a meal. There was no reason why he should not go down to the ranch and wait for Creighton to come home, no reason why he should stay away until the man returned. On the thought, he picked up his rifle, rose, and went further back into the timber. He tightened the cinches of the saddle on his blue roan horse, mounted, and rode downslope.

She came from the house as he rode into the ranchyard, on her way to the well with a wooden pail. Seeing him, she halted, and regarded him warily, if not with fright. He could read her thoughts. She was alone, and he was a stranger, and a stranger might mean danger for her.

She looked past him, out across the open range, and her anxiety increased. But she managed to smile and say, "Well, hello."

He reined in, far enough away so that she needn't become more frightened. He regretted now that he hadn't waited until the outfit's riders returned. He didn't want her to know fear because of him.

He was not used to smiling, but he smiled now, to make it easier for her, and said, "Hello. Is this Creighton's Circle J Ranch?"

"It is."

"I have some business with Creighton."

"He's not here now."

"But he'll be home soon?"

"I—I expect him any minute," she said, not too convincingly. "He took the crew out on calf round-up, but he will come in once the camp is set up."

He noted that she did not invite him to stay. He said, "If you'd rather have me come back later, I'll ride along."

She considered that, and apparently decided that there was no harm in a man who would offer to go his way if she desired it. She said, "No need to do that. My father will be along some time tonight. No, stay. Put up your horse. If you haven't eaten I'll fix you something."

He said, "John Creighton is your father?"

"Yes. I'm Laura Creighton." She was silent a moment. Then, "And who are you?"

He was slow in replying, jolted by this. He hadn't expected Creighton to have a daughter; not a grown daughter, at least. He wondered if this were the *right* John Creighton; he worried about it. He had searched for more than a year, ever since he was released from the pen at Huntsville, Texas. When he'd heard that the Circle J outfit in Montana was owned by a John Creighton, he'd taken it for granted that it was the man he sought, the man he had to find if he were ever to have any peace of mind.

He looked searchingly at this girl, trying to see something of the man in her. She was twenty, or a year or two older. A wholesome-looking young woman, she had a wealth of soft black hair, and her features were at the same time bold and finely molded. There was nothing coarse about her, as there was in many back-country women. He could see nothing of the man he sought in her. But it was nine years since he'd seen John Creighton, he reminded himself, and then the man's features had been obscured by a shaggy black beard. He became aware that his sharp scrutiny was making her uneasy again.

He said, "My name's Dan Logan." He forced another smile. "I knew your father a long time ago, down in Texas."

"Texas? I didn't know he ever spent any time in Texas."

"It could be that I've come to the wrong John Creighton."

She shook her head. "Not necessarily," she said. "My father may have been in Texas without my knowing it. You see, I didn't live with him when I was a child." She seemed to sense something wrong about Dan Logan, for she asked, "Does he expect you? Did you let him know you were coming?"

"No."

"But your business with him . . ."

"An old deal. We were partners once. He owes me some money."

SHE nodded to show that she understood, but there was doubt of him in her eyes. She said, "It's odd that he never mentioned you." Then she smiled. "But he' not a talkative sort, my father. Nor are you. You haven't yet told me if you'd like something to eat."

He smiled, more easily this time. "It's been a long time since I've had a home-cooked meal."

"Well, put up your horse," Laura said, "and then come into the kitchen."

Later, after he was fed—well fed on steak, hashed-brown potatoes, canned peaches, biscuits, coffee, and dried-apple pie—he said, "It was a long trip up from Texas, but that meal made all the traveling worthwhile. You're a good cook, Miss Laura."

"Don't call me 'Miss Laura,' " she said. "When anyone calls me that I feel like a spinster. Call me 'Laurie,' won't you?"

"Sure. But you'll never be a spinster, Laurie."

"No? What makes you so sure of that?"

"Montana men must appreciate good cooking, too."

She made a face. "I expected a different answer, a more personal compliment. But you're not the sort to say anything you don't want to say, are you, Dan Logan?"

"I'm just passing through," he said. "It would do me no good to say, 'Laurie, you're a real nice looking girl.' " He laughed, for the first time in longer than he could remember. "You want me to leave now? I could wait outside for your father."

"No. Stay here. I like company."

"Lonely around here for you?"

"Sometimes. I lived in St. Louis until two years ago, and I'm used to being where it's busy and there are lots of people. But I like it here. I never want to leave Circle J Ranch."

"It's good to have a home like this."

"Where is your home, Dan?"

He was about to say that he had no home, but realized that would sound like a bid for sympathy. So he said, "Wherever I hang my hat." Then, rising, "Rider coming in."

Laurie glanced from the window. "It's Dad."

Dan reached for his hat. "I'll go meet him," he said.

He felt a rising excitement as he stepped from the kitchen and saw the man dismounting over by the corral. It was nearly full dark now, and he could not make out the man's features. He could see that Creighton was beardless, however, and it seemed that this man was not as burly as the man he sought. But a beard was easily gotten rid of, and a man could lose much weight in nine years. As Dan started across the yard, Creighton, still unaware of him, began to off-saddle his horse. There was one way to find out if this were the right John Creighton, Dan realized.

He said, "Hello, there, Jake Carr!"

Creighton's reaction told him that he'd found his man. The rancher uttered a startled, incoherent sound. He dropped the saddle he'd just pulled off the horse. He swung around, grabbing for his gun.

Dan leaped forward, grappled with him. Creighton's gun went off, shattering the night's stillness. They strained savagely against each other for a brief interval, Dan with a viselike grip on Creighton's gun hand. He slammed his free hand to the older man's face, staggering him. He got in a second blow, clouting Creighton hard to the jaw. Creighton lost his gun and his balance. Reeling backward, he came up against the corral fence, then fell to his hands and knees.

The shot had brought Laurie from the house. She came running, crying, "Dad!" in such alarm that it was evident she thought he'd been shot. She pushed past Dan, sank to her knees beside her father.

DAN broke the revolver and ejected the cartridges, letting them fall to the ground.

He said, "Laurie, he'll be all right."

Creighton was already rising, the girl with him. He stood swaying, looking dazedly at Dan. Laurie held onto his arm, she too facing Dan. She was pale, still frightened. Creighton leaned against the fence.

"Dan Logan?" he asked. "You're Dan Logan?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten one of your old partners, Mister Creighton."

"You've changed. You don't look the same."

"Where I've been, men don't stay the same," Dan said. "We've got business, mister. Unless you want your daughter to know what kind of business, you'd better send her inside."

Creighton said, "Yes, Laurie, go inside."

"No! I won't leave you alone with this crazy man."

"Do as you're told, Laurie," Dan said. "No harm will come to him—provided he plays square with me. Go on now. I wouldn't lie to you."

Laurie said, "Dad!"

Her father shook his head.

She went then, with a final fear-filled look at Dan.

When she was inside the house he said, "John Creighton, alias Jake Carr." His tone was bitter. "From bank robber to respectable rancher—and a loving father, to boot. You were a family man when you pulled that job, not a down-and-out drifter like you told me and the others. Did you use the loot from that robbery to get your start here?"

Creighton nodded.

He looked so different that Dan could have passed him on a trail and not known him as the man who'd once called himself Jake Carr. He was now a man of fifty, with gray at his temples and in his natty mustache. He was now leaner. In his black broadcloth suit, white shirt, maroon string tie, gray stetson, he looked respectable and prosperous.

Dan said, "You know what happened to the rest of us?"

"I know."

"But you didn't care."

"I cared, Dan. I'm not an unfeeling person."

Dan sort of sneered. "I'll bet you cared," he said. "You carried the loot when we made our getaway. You had a race horse, not a cow pony. The posse couldn't catch up with you, but it sure caught up with us. Hank Nolan got killed and Matt Sarbo and I got thrown in jail. Matt broke out before

the trial, but I went to the pen. Ten years they gave me, but they let me out in eight for good behavior. And I'll tell you, mister, Huntsville is no holiday resort."

"There was nothing I could do for you, Dan."

"You wouldn't have anyway."

"Now, Dan—"

"You on that fast horse, riding away with the loot!"

Creighton shook his head. "You misjudge me, Dan. I didn't doublecross you. There was thirty thousand dollars. With Hank killed, that meant ten thousand for each of us—myself, you, Matt. I met Matt Sarbo later and gave him his share, and I intended to give you yours after you got out of Huntsville."

"That's just what you're going to do, mister," Dan said. "But I think you're lying. I've been hunting you for more than a year. I finally got a line on you down in Cheyenne, about a month ago. At the same time I ran into Matt Sarbo. He told me that he's looking for you, too, and has been all these years. If you'd divvied with him, he wouldn't be looking for you."

"Dan, I swear—"

"Trouble was, Matt didn't know how to look for you," Dan went on. "He was looking for a bearded hombre named Jake Carr. Me, I looked for a John Creighton. You know how I found out your right name, friend?"

"No."

"When you planned the robbery, you drew a plan of the Fabain bank on the back of an old envelope you pulled from your pocket. I got a look at the front side of that envelope. I don't remember the address on it, but the name was John Creighton."

"YOU told Matt when you saw him in Cheyenne?"

"I told him. I told him you were ranching somewhere in Montana."

"Then I can expect him to show up."

"He'll want his ten thousand, too, Creighton."

Creighton shook his head. "I paid Matt Sarbo," he said. "I swear it. I know what he'll want—blackmail. How is it you and he didn't team up?"

"He's no good," Dan said. "I want no part of him."

"Well, I'll try to handle him when he shows up," Creighton said flatly. "Like you say, he's no good. He'll make trouble for me if he can. Dan, I don't want my daughter to know about this."

"She won't hear of it from me."

"When I threw in with you and Matt and Hank, I was hard up. I was desperate, I suppose. My wife had died and I'd lost a small business I owned in St. Louis. I had my daughter to raise. I placed her with a family, but I had to pay for her keep. Times were hard. I drifted into Texas, looking for a job where I could make enough to feed myself and support my child. There were no jobs. You know that. You were a cowhand without a job."

"I know it," Dan said. "And I was a fool kid of nineteen, so much a fool that I let you and the others talk me into robbing a bank."

"It was your only mistake, Dan, and my only mistake."

"I paid for mine. You sure didn't pay for yours."

"That's true. But it's been on my conscience ever since."

"I'll bet. I'll bet you haven't slept good any night since."

Creighton sighed. "I won't argue with you, Dan," he said. "You're bitter. You've a right to be bitter. Eight years in prison is enough to sour any man. But at any rate, you've paid your debt to society."

"Not all of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Dan said, "that I'm going to square myself with that bank in Fabian. When I got out of Huntsville, I went to the president of that bank and told him I was going to pay him back my share of the loot if I could. Well, I can. You're going to give me my ten thousand dollars and I'm going to send it to Fabian by Wells Fargo. How long will it take you to raise that much money?"

"I need no time, Dan," Creighton said. "I've got some cattle money in the bank

at Miles City. I'll give you a draft on my account, and you can ride over there and collect the ten thousand."

"All right."

"Come into the house with me."

"There's just one thing, Creighton."

"Yes?"

"No tricks," Dan said. "I won't fool around with you if you try to outsmart me."

Creighton smiled ruefully. "I'm hardly in a position to try any tricks," he said. "You have the upper hand all around. Even if I saw a chance to overpower you, I wouldn't take it. I won't risk having my daughter find out about my past." He came away from the corral fence at last, moving not too steadily. "Come along, Dan. I'll give you the draft and then you can go your way. The sooner you leave the better it will be for both of us."

Dan followed him to the house. They entered the kitchen and found Laurie standing just inside the doorway, the frightened look still in her eyes.

"It's all right, Laurie," he told her. "Dan means me no harm. You go up to your room and—well, try to forget about this."

He left the kitchen by way of a long hall, Dan close behind him. The hall widened at the front of the house, and they crossed it there to a room which proved to be, when Creighton lighted a lamp, furnished as an office—or rather, since it was so comfortably furnished, as a study. Creighton sat down at the desk. Dan threw the empty gun onto a leather armchair. He took out makings, rolled and lighted a cigarette, watching Creighton fill out and sign a form.

HANDING him the check, Creighton said, "You're doing a wise thing, Dan. Don't let anything change your mind."

"I won't."

"I've often thought of squaring myself with that bank in Fabian."

"What stopped you?"

Creighton shrugged. "I have no good excuse," he said. "I didn't have any extra money during the first few years. In fact, it's only been during the past two years that I began to make any sizable amount out of Circle J Ranch. Too, I didn't quite know how to pay back the money without it becoming public knowledge that I was a bank robber. So I kept putting it off as something unpleasant I would one day get around to doing."

Dan said, "You'd better square things before it's too late." He stared at the oblong of paper. "This thing is good?"

"It's good, Dan."

"It better be," Dan said. "I don't want to have to come back here."

He turned toward the door, then froze. Laurie stood there with a derringer pistol in her hand, its over-and-under barrel pointed at his chest. If it was possible for a girl to look grim, that described her. Her hand was steady; the ugly little weapon, deadly at such short range, never wavered. And her voice was quite calm saying, "Dad, get his gun."

Dan heard Creighton shove back his chair and come from behind the desk, and he had to stand there helplessly and await what was to happen to him. He did not doubt for a second that the girl would shoot if he made a move to defend himself.

Dan was a little dazed by what happened next. Creighton did not get around behind him and relieve him of his gun, but stepped between him and the girl and said, "Laurie, give me that derringer." She protested, "But, Dad, this man—" She obeyed, however, and her father slipped the weapon into his coat pocket.

He said, "How much did you hear, Laurie?"

She said bleakly, "Enough to know that something is very wrong—and that this man is a danger to you."

Creighton's shoulders sagged. His face looked suddenly tired, and much older. "Something is very wrong," he said. "And I'll have to tell you about it, even though it's likely to make you hate me. But Dan means me no harm." He turned to Dan. "You may go now, if you wish."

"All right. But I'm sorry your daughter found out because of me."

"Don't blame yourself."

"A man in your position could probably square things with that bank in Fabian."

Dan threw himself on Sarbo and got a grip on the gun

Creighton nodded. "I won't put it off any longer," he said. "I'll get in touch with those people down there and fix things up. Good luck, Dan."

Dan said, "Luck to you, Creighton," and moved to the door.

Laurie was staring at her father, a tormented look in her eyes.

Dan said, "Laurie, when times are hard men get desperate and sometimes do foolish things. Don't let this make you think any less of your father."

She did not seem to hear.

He stepped around her, into the hall. He left the house and crossed the yard to the corral. He roped and saddled his roan horse, mounted, rode out. He had never felt so lonely in all his life as now, when riding away from Circle J Ranch. He tried to understand the reason, and knew it was Laurie. He had known her only a couple of hours, but in that short time she had become important to him. It was foolish of him to let her be important, for she was as far beyond his reach as the moon up there in the Montana sky.

SHE would forgive her father for having been a thief; that was only natural. But she would always look with revulsion upon any other man who had taken part in an armed robbery; that was the way of the world. But even if she had not learned about that Texas bank robbery, she could not be anything to him.

He had nothing to offer her—or any girl. He had no job, no prospects. He had worked at a dozen poorly-paid jobs since his release from prison. He had worked as a farmhand one month, as a livery stable hostler two weeks. He had worked in a railroad freight warehouse at Denver. He had tried his hand at breaking broncs for a rancher in Wyoming.

He'd managed in somewhat more than a year to acquire decent clothes, a six-shooter, a rifle with a telescopic sight, a horse, some campgear and provisions. In between jobs, he'd hunted John Creighton. Now he had found Creighton. He would return his share of the bank loot, then be free to make something of his life.

That something would be little enough, he knew. Times were good now, jobs plentiful. But any job he could hold down would be no stepping stone to a successful career, unless his luck changed, and without a measure of success a man could not even dream of winning a girl like Laurie Creighton. He thought of that slip of paper in his pocket. It was worth ten thousand dollars, and with that much money a man could get a start in the cattle business. And once he had his start . . . but he knew he couldn't use that money. He couldn't be a thief all over again. True, he had served his time in prison. He had paid for his part in that robbery. But unless he returned that ten thousand dollars to the bank, he would always feel like a thief.

He rode slowly through the night, into the hills, and even when he was behind bars he hadn't felt so low in spirit. He tried to put Laurie out of his thoughts, but the picture of her was etched too deeply in his memory. He could never so much as court her, but he would never be able to forget her. That was something he had to face.

His camp was in a little hollow on the east side of the hills. It was a pleasant spot, with a little pool of crystal-clear water, fed by a swift-flowing spring and shaded by pines. It was midnight when he reached the camp. He had no warning that anyone else was nearby until he reined in and a voice said, "Have any luck with Creighton, Danny boy?"

It was Matt Sarbo's voice.

Sarbo and two other men were bedded down at the campsite. Now he got from his blankets and threw some brush on the embers of the fire. The brush ignited, threw a flickering red-yellow glow on Sarbo's stocky body and tough face. He was grinning slyly. The other two were awake. They sat up, but did not leave their beds. The firelight didn't show Dan much of them, but he had the feeling that they were strangers to him.

Sarbo said, "We trailed you up from Cheyenne, Tip Ryan and Chuck Worden and me. We weren't far behind you at any time. Fact is, we were close by when you left your camp this morning. We decided

to let you visit Creighton alone and tell us about it afterwards. So we loafed around here."

Dan was frowning. He felt uneasy, almost worried. "Why?" he asked.

"Why what, Danny?"

"Why'd you come up here?"

"After my share of the loot," Sarbo said. "What else?"

Dan started to dismount, then thought better of it. He settled himself back in the saddle. He said, "Creighton claims he gave you your share right after the robbery."

Sarbo said, "Does he, though?" He drew his revolver, beaded Dan. "You're not riding anywhere tonight, bucko. Don't think you are. Get off that bronc." When Dan made no move to get down, he thumbed back the gun's hammer and lifted his voice to a bellow. "Get down, I tell you!"

DAN knew enough about Matt Sarbo to obey. The man could be a brute when crossed. Dismounted, Dan offsaddled his horse and staked it out a little distance from the camp. He saw four horses a little farther away, and supposed that one had served Sarbo and the other two as a pack animal. Returning to the camp, he spread out his blankets. Sarbo still stood by the fire, his gun in his hand.

"How'd you make out with Creighton?" he demanded. "He did turn out to be our old partner, Jake Carr, eh?"

"Yeah."

"You get your share of the loot?"

"He gave me a check for it."

"Let's see it."

Dan stared at him. "Why?" he demanded. "It's mine. Nobody else's."

Sarbo said, "Tip, rustle yourself over to our friend there and see if he's telling the truth. And while you're at it, get his gun."

Tip Ryan rose and came to Dan, careful not to get between him and Sarbo's gun. He was a wiry little man, but despite his small size he looked as boot tough as Sarbo. He took Dan's gun from its holster, then demanded the check.

Dan took the check from his shirt pocket, handed it over, and Ryan carried it to Sarbo, who examined it in the light of the fire. Sarbo holstered his gun, came to Dan, gave him back the check.

"So you told the truth," he said. "But, you poor fool, that paper may be worthless. I can't see Creighton handing over ten thousand dollars at this late date to a punk like you. You're likely to be kicked out of that Miles City bank when you try to cash that check, bucko."

"No, I think Creighton's on the level."

"He sure wasn't on the level when he called himself Jake Carr."

"A man can change, Matt."

"Not Jake Carr, even if he does have a fancy handle like John Creighton nowadays. He didn't give you any trouble, eh?"

"Not much," Dan said. "He pulled a gun on me, but I took it from him."

"What about his cowhands?"

"They're out on round-up."

"Now, isn't that a stroke of luck," Sarbo said, grinning hugely. "Tip, you and Chuck saddle the horses. We're going visiting."

"Now?" Ryan asked. "In the middle of the night?"

"Sure," Sarbo told him. "We'll get to Creighton's place in time for breakfast."

Ryan and the third man, a young hardcase, went to saddle their mounts. Sarbo kept a close watch on Dan. On his part, Dan Logan felt a growing alarm. He was sure that Creighton had told the truth when saying that he'd given Sarbo his share of the loot. Therefore Sarbo intended to blackmail Creighton.

It wasn't likely that the rancher would submit to blackmail, now he had decided to square himself with that Texas bank, but that would make him a target for Sarbo's anger and brutality. He would be at the mercy of these hardcases. Worse still, Laurie would be endangered. It would be like Matt Sarbo, Dan realized, to threaten to harm the daughter if the father refused his demands.

Sarbo must have sensed what was running through Dan's mind, for he said, "I've got a queer feeling about you, Danny boy. I think you turned soft in the pen."

Dan was blaming himself for the presence of Sarbo and his partners here in Mon-

tana. It seemed to him that the guilt would be his if harm came to the Creightons. He tried to think of some way to keep the three from going to Circle J Ranch. There was only one way: to jump Matt Sarbo and take his gun and use it to throw down on the other two.

SARBO guessed his intention. He said, "Watch it, bucko," and reached for his gun. He already had it clear of its holster when Dan leapt at him.

Dan landed only one blow. It caught Sarbo on the left jaw, but the man was rock hard. He was only slightly staggered, and before Dan could hit him again Sarbo struck out with his long-barrelled Colt. His aim was good. The gun's barrel thudded against Dan's left temple. There was an explosion of pain for Dan Logan. His knees buckled. He went sprawling to the ground, barely conscious.

Sarbo laughed. He enjoyed this sort of thing. He yelled to his companions to bring a rope. When it was brought to him, he tied Dan up hand and foot.

"That's to keep you from trying to warn Creighton, Danny boy," Sarbo said. "And it'll keep you here until we get back. If I can't make Creighton pay up, we'll go to Miles City with you and help you cash that check—and share the money with you."

He laughed again, then moved away.

Minutes later the three rode out, and Dan, still dazed and full of pain, began a desperate straining at his bonds. There was hatred of Matt Sarbo in him now, and fear for the Creightons—for Laurie, mostly. In trying to free himself, he thrashed wildly about on the ground until he was spent and out of breath. The rope about his ankles seemed looser, but that binding his wrists behind him had not given at all.

He groaned with despair.

Once he realized that he could not break his bonds, Dan got hold of himself and tried to figure out a way to cut them. He had a jack-knife in the pocket of his levis, but he could not get at it. There was an ax among his camp gear. He'd used it to cut wood for a breakfast fire, and remembered leaving it by a fallen tree.

The tree was some distance from his camp, and his only means of locomotion, trussed up as he was, was to roll over and over. It was an agonizing way to travel and it seemed to take him an eternity, but finally he reached the dead tree. He maneuvered himself into position to rub the rope about his wrist against the sharp edge of the blade.

Another eternity passed before the rope was cut through. His wrists and hands were nicked badly. He used his knife to cut the rope from his ankles, then scrambled to his feet. He was still dazed from the blow of Sarbo's gun, and for a long moment he stood swaying. Gradually he grew steady, but then realized that the hardcase trio had taken his revolver. If they'd also taken his rifle, he would be unable to help the Creightons.

He moved on wobbly legs to where his saddle lay, and felt a vast relief when he saw that his riffe was still in its booot. He picked up his saddle, telling himself that he would make Sarbo and the other two regret their neglect in not taking his saddle gun. There was hatred in him for those three, and it was almost as great as his fear for the safety of the Creightons—for Laurie, especially.

He had no idea of how much time had passed since the three hardcases left the camp, but judged that it must have taken him far more than an hour to free himself. That meant they would reach Circle J Ranch before he could overtake them, if they traveled at a brisk pace.

HE SADDLED his roan, swung to the saddle, and set out through the darkness at a lope. It occurred to him that Sarbo must have scouted through the hills during the day and discovered the location of Creighton's ranch. At any rate, the hardcase had set out without having asked directions. That seemed proof that he knew the way. On the other hand, there was a chance that the trio had merely taken it for granted that Circle J Ranch lay beyond the hills and, not knowing its exact location, would lose some time searching for its headquarters. In that event he might

still arrive there ahead of them and warn John Creighton. And side Creighton, Dan told himself. The two of them would certainly be able to stand off those three toughhands.

There was no trail through the hills, much of the terrain was dangerous for fast night-riding, and all of it was extremely rough going. Once Dan took a wrong turn, and traveled for perhaps a full mile before

He rode slowly through the night, into the hills

discovering that he was heading in the wrong direction. He lost much precious time in retracing his steps. Again, his horse made a misstep on a treacherous slope, and both it and he took a bad fall. He wasted more time, in making sure the horse was not injured, and in getting it over its fright. It was about an hour before dawn when he reached a ridge overlooking Circle J headquarters.

His heart sank when he saw some of the ranchhouse windows agleam with lamplight. He was too late. He could not believe that either Creighton or Laurie was up and about so long before dawn for any reason other than that Sarbo and his partners had aroused them.

He had reined in his blowing horse upon seeing the lighted windows, but now he spurred it forward and quartered downslope at a reckless run. By the time he reached the flat country below, caution came to him. They would hear him if he rode in at a gallop, he realized, and, guessing that he intended to side the Creightons, they would surely try to gun him down. He would make an easy target, coming in across the grass flats. He slowed the roan to a walk, and drew his rifle from his boot. He levered a cartridge into the Winchester's chamber. When within perhaps a hundred yards of the buildings, he dropped from the roan and went on afoot. He reached the barn, moved along the side of the log building. Three horses stood ground-hitched before the ranchhouse, and the lighted windows were those of the room Dan knew to be Creighton's office.

Taking a chance that all three hardcases were inside, Dan crossed the yard and climbed the stone steps of the porch that ran across the front of the house. He moved as quietly as he could to one of the lighted windows, and looked into the room. He saw John Creighton slumped in his desk chair, and Matt Sarbo standing over him. The rancher had been roughed up; he looked dazed, and was bleeding from a cut at his left temple. Sarbo had his gun in his hand and a wicked grin on his tough face.

Laurie was across the room, sagging against the wall. She wore a green wrapper over her nightgown. Her dark hair was tousled as if she had just been aroused from sleep. Tip Ryan stood near her, watching her. There was an ugly gleam in Ryan's eyes.

Dan had only time enough to note that the third hardcase, Chuck Worden, was not in the room, when the front door opened and Worden stepped out onto the porch. Dan swung around. Worden uttered a startled yelp, grabbed out his gun. The

man was fast. He fired once, twice, a third time before Dan could bring his rifle to bear. However, he was as wild as he was fast. Dan heard the shriek of the slugs, but was not hit. He squeezed out his shot, but an instant too late. Worden was moving backward, into the doorway. Dan moved along the porch, jacking another cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber. The door slammed.

CAUTION came to him again. Knowing it would be suicidal to barge into the house, he turned to the steps and went down to the yard. He crossed to the barn at a run, then faced about in the deep shadows at the side of the building. The lamp in the office had been extinguished, and now for a long moment there was utter silence. After perhaps five minutes the door opened a few inches and Sarbo's bellow shattered the night quiet.

"Logan! You hear me, Logan?"

Dan thought it wise to keep silent, in the hope that his silence would bait the hardcases out to see what he was up to. He had no course of action planned, other than to counter whatever move they made, but with luck he could draw them away from the Creightons and into a fight. It would be a fight with the odds against him, but with luck he could shoot down Matt Sarbo and that, he was sure, would scare the other two away. However, Sarbo was too cunning to walk into a trap.

He called, "Logan, I know you're out there waiting to gun us down. Now you listen, bucko. I'm sending Creighton out to parley with you."

Dan still did not reply, and after a minute or two a figure stepped out onto the porch and slowly descended the steps. It was John Creighton, Dan saw. The rancher came to the center of the yard, walking unsteadily.

"Over here at the barn," Dan called. "Come closer, Creighton."

Creighton took a few more slow steps toward the barn, but then Sarbo yelled, "That's far enough! Tell him from there. Read the riot act to him, Creighton."

Creighton halted, and even in the darkness it was clear to Dan Logan that his spirit was broken. "Dan, clear out. You'll just make things worse." He spoke dully, but in a loud voice so that Sarbo could hear. It was evident that he'd been ordered to talk out and not hold a private conversation. "I'm going to Miles City with Sarbo and one of the others. The third man will stay here and hold Laurie as a hostage. I'm to draw ten thousand dollars from the bank and give it to Sarbo, then they'll clear out and leave Laurie and me alone. There's nothing you can do, Dan, so go your way."

Dan felt the man's hopelessness touch him. He said, "All right."

Creighton hesitated.

Sarbo yelled, "Get back here, damn it!"

Creighton started to turn, then said, low-voiced, "Dan, don't bother about me, but help Laurie. You hear? Help Laurie." Then, to cover up, he shouted, "Don't argue. Clear out!"

"Yeah, Logan, clear out," Sarbo yelled. "You're not wanted around here."

Dan called, "All right, have it your way," and, while Creighton returned to the house, he went through the pretense of clearing out.

There was still a little of the night left, perhaps enough darkness remaining to cover him in what he must do. He returned to his horse, mounted, rode toward the hills at a hard lope. They would be listening for the beat of hoofs, he knew; and when the sound faded in the distance Sarbo and his partners would believe that he was gone and no longer a threat to them. That was what he must make them believe, that he was clearing out for good. He rode at that brisk pace for perhaps a half mile, then slowed to a walk. Knowing that they would scan the range for signs of him when daylight came, he sought a place of concealment for his horse. He located a brushed fringed hollow, rode into it, and there dismounted. He left the roan ground-hitched and headed back toward the ranch on foot, carrying his rifle.

He saw a pink trace of dawn in the eastern sky, and knew that his time was running out. He needed to reach the buildings—the barn was nearest to him—before

there was light enough for them to spot him. He began to run as fast as a riding man wearing high-heeled boots could run, and soon he was gasping for breath and there was a knife-sharp stitch of pain in his left side. But still he ran, and at last the big barn was directly ahead.

A hundred yards from it he sank to the ground amid a little clump of brush, stopped by the realization that there was no way into the barn from the rear. He had hoped for a door or a window that would permit him to enter the building, and from its yard doorway open fire on Sarbo and the other two. Now he was forced to try something else, and it was growing lighter by the minute.

HE NOTICED it after a minute or two of peering about—a shallow gully running past his position, toward the north side of the ranch headquarters. He sprinted for the gully, dived into it. He crawled along the depression until he was beyond both the barn and its adjoining corral, then halted and rose sufficiently to glance about the ranch yard. It was full dawn now, and he had no difficulty seeing the three horses before the house, and Chuck Worden on guard with a rifle on the porch steps.

Worden sat there, with his rifle across his knees, puffing on a cigarette, an easy target if Dan could have brought himself to kill in cold blood. Some minutes passed; Worden finished his cigarette, yawned and stretched. Then Matt Sarbo and Tip Ryan appeared, with John Creighton. Laurie remained inside the house, Dan was careful to note.

Excitement gripped him. He was not playing the game exactly as John Creighton wanted. Creighton would have liked him to wait until Sarbo and one of his partners left for Miles City with the rancher, and then protect Laurie from the man left behind. But Dan was determined to try to save Creighton as well as his daughter. He had some hope of doing that, despite the odds of three to one.

This scheme of Sarbo's, leaving one of his men to hold Laurie as a hostage, while he and his other partner took Creighton to Miles City and forced him to withdraw money from his bank account for them, was foolproof, Dan knew, except for his taking a hand in the game. But a part of his eagerness to have the showdown here and now came of his hatred for Matt Sarbo.

He wanted to pay Sarbo back for the blow the hardcase had struck him with his gun. Too, Sarbo had not changed in all the years that had passed since the bank robbery in Texas. Unlike Dan himself, and John Creighton, Sarbo had not made up his mind to go straight. In fact, the hardcase was even more crooked and vicious than he'd been nine years ago. He needed to be thwarted in this latest scheme he'd planned.

Sarbo and Ryan had got Creighton mounted on one of the horses standing before the house, and now they mounted the other animals. Worden was the man to stay with Laurie, then. He still lounged on the porch steps. Laurie was inside, out of harm's way if there were shooting. And there would be shooting, Dan knew.

He rose to a kneeling position, rifle to shoulder.

And now, as the three men turned away from the house, he shouted, "That's as far as you're going, Sarbo."

The three riders wheeled about at the south end of the yard, Sarbo and Ryan grabbing for their six-shooters. On the porch steps, Chuck Worden came alive, and it was he who started the shooting.

Sarbo bellowed, "Get him! Get that meddler!"

Dan heard the crack of Worden's rifle and the shriek of its slug. He knew that the range was too great for accurate handgun fire, so he momentarily ignored the other two and caught Worden in his telescopic sight. Worden fired another hasty shot at him, then Dan Squeezed the trigger, and saw the hardcase knocked off balance by the impact of the slug. He tumbled loosely down the steps.

Sarbo cut loose with another wild yell, then jabbed spurs to his horse and rode toward Dan at a gallop. Behind him, Dan saw, John Creighton reined his horse in

against Tip Ryan's mount. Creighton got a hold on Ryan's gun arm, and the two men strained against each.

Sarbo's face was contorted by rage, and it was his wild streak that drove him at Dan Logan's ready rifle. A more sensible man would have realized his danger. But Sarbo came on, opening fire now. Dan aimed, fired. His shot never reached Sarbo. It caught the horse instead, hitting it squarely between the eyes. The animal was dead even before it fell. Sarbo threw himself clear of its body, landing on his side. A lesser man would have been stunned by such a fall, but not Matt Sarbo. He was instantly up, firing again at Dan, then charging like a man gone berserk.

NOW the range was too short for a rifle, and Dan missed another shot at Sarbo. Before he could lever another cartridge into the Winchester's chamber, Sarbo was on him and aiming his gun at Dan's head. Instead of jumping up, Dan threw himself against Sarbo's legs from his kneeling position, and the shot went wild. Off balance, Sarbo toppled over backward. Having dropped his rifle, Dan threw himself upon the hardcase and with his left hand got a grip on the barrel of the gun. He was unable to wrench the weapon from Sarbo's fist, however; the best he could do was to keep Sarbo from pressing the muzzle against him and firing a shot into his body.

Sarbo was a bull of man, but Dan, fighting for his life, found himself matching the bigger man's strength. Then Sarbo, with a desperate lunge, heaved over so that Dan was beneath him. He clouted Dan to the jaw, stunning him, and forced his gun against the younger man's body. He gasped, "Now, damn you—" But Dan still had his hold on the barrel of the weapon, and an instant before Sarbo squeezed the trigger, he jerked it away from his own body.

There was a scream from Sarbo and a sudden sagging of his body. Dan heaved the man off him, and the gun was now free in his hand. He heaved to his feet, stood swaying. Sarbo no longer screamed. He no longer moved. There was a wet crimson stain on his shirt front, from the wound that had been inflicted by his own gun. Even as Dan stared at him and realized that Sarbo was shot, the man died.

Dan looked across the ranchyard, finally, and saw Laurie on the porch, staring down at Worden's body. He saw too that John Creighton had taken a capable hand in the showdown. The rancher had wrested Tip Ryan's gun away from him and now both men were down off their horses. The surviving hardcase stood there, with his empty hands held high.

It was over and done with, and Dan, wanting no rehashing of it, picked up his rifle and turned away. He heard Creighton call to him, but he didn't so much as look back. He walked out to the hollow where he'd left his horse. He booted his rifle, pulled himself to the saddle, and rode on toward the hills. He saw the sunrise when he reached the crest of the nearest slope. It would be another fine summer day, but many such days would come and go, Dan knew, before he would forget Laurie.

Reaching his camp, he cut some wood, started a fire, made a pot of coffee. He breakfasted on coffee and a cigarette, then began gathering his gear together. A rider came along while he was tying his little pack behind the roan's saddle. It was Laurie. She came mounted on a pretty pinto pony. Dan felt a sudden ache deep inside him.

Laurie said, "Dad sent me after you, Dan. He said you're to come back to Circle J after you've finished at Miles City.

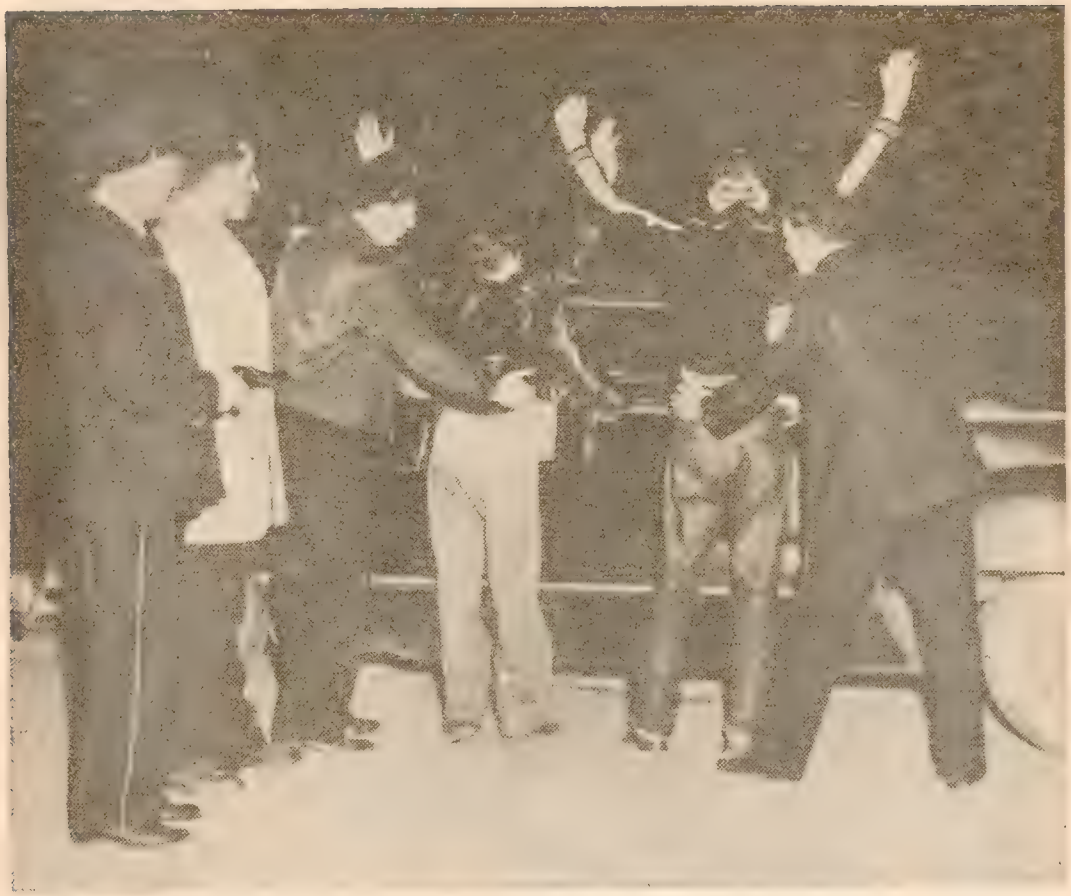
"Well, I don't know . . ."

"He has a job for you. He wants you at the ranch. We both want you, Dan."

His heart leaped. But he said, "Laurie, I'd like it fine at Circle J. I guess you know why. I've got to admit it—that I've fallen hard for you. But I'm an ex-convict."

"And my father was in that bank robbery with you," she said. "Dan, I doubt if it's ladylike for me to admit such a thing. But . . . well, I've fallen hard for you, too. Will you come back to Circle J—for me?"

Suddenly it was clear to him that his future was to be as good as his past had been bad. When he said, "Yes, I'll come back for you, Laurie," his voice sounded strange, because he was so choked up.



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Hearing Herbie's step, he let Lily go and whirled around

Journey

ALLISON JOINED the wagon train to find a killer,

but he couldn't turn his back on a girl in trouble. . . .

SHORTLY after sunup on a shivery cold fall morning, Herbie Allison spotted the Ross outfit. He pulled his roan up sharply where the trail took a dip toward tumbling Canyon Creek and stared down at the camp out of hard, calculating eyes. He saw five canvas-covered wagons, five men, and two women. Somehow he hadn't expected to find any women with the outfit, even if Vic Barker had said one of the whispering voices might have belonged to a woman.

Then Herbie suddenly felt so tired that he was a little sick and, for a moment, he swayed dizzily in the saddle.

"Plenty of time to rest after you get your man," he told himself angrily, and squared his big shoulders.

He was just a kid—twenty-one come next December. Tall and rangy, he had stubborn sandy hair, a boyish brown face, big feet, and big hands. The never-grow-up kind, folks around Canyon City sometimes said about him—always ready to break out with a great hoot of laughter at anybody's joke. But that was before someone had put a bullet through Chuck's back. Since then, Herbie hadn't done any more laughing than he'd done resting, which was none at all to speak of.

"Somebody murdered him for two thousand dollars," Herbie had told Sheriff Marks in a brittle voice. "Chuck was headed to town to pay off our debts—our first real money since we leased the Crooked-horn Range."

"Take it easy, Herbie," Sheriff Marks had said kindly. "Don't go turning yourself into a killer. Try to get justice, not revenge."

At that Herbie had walked out of the office. Now, staring down at the campfire, he wondered which one of those five men had killed Chuck. His hate and bitterness spilling over into his young eyes and face, he rode on toward the camp.

They saw him coming, but went right on with their eating, even after he rode straight up to them and sat waiting for someone to say the first word.

"Howdy, stranger," the man nearest him finally said.

He was big, broad, and seamy-faced, with streaks of gray in his black hair. Looking at him, Herbie thought that here was a man who would shoot another for money. You could tell that by the hard set of his unshaven jaw.

"My name's Herb Allison," Herbie said.

to Julesberg

By BEN FRANK

HE SHIFTED his gaze over all seven faces in a hurry, trying to see if the name meant anything. If it did, no one let on. Of course, it could be that the killer didn't know the man he'd robbed was Chuck Allison, Herbie's older brother. And then, for some reason, Herbie shifted his gaze back to the younger woman and suddenly realized that she was just a girl, eighteen maybe, pretty, with hair the color of ripe wheat, and eyes reminding him of summer skies.

"I'm Otto Ross," the big man rumbled. He nodded toward a bony young man with a thin mustache and a weak chin. "My nephew, Fred Sorby. And this is his wife, Flo. Their baby's asleep in the wagon."

Herbie glanced from Fred Sorby to the woman. She was thin and tired looking. His eyes drifted back to Sorby. Sometimes a man like Sorby would get mixed up with a dancehall girl or a gambler and suddenly need money. But before he could make up his mind about Sorby, Ross went on with the introductions.

"Jed Motter." He indicated a tall red-headed man. "Jedy's driving a wagon for me. So's Buck Krumel."

Herbie glanced from the red-head to Buck Krumel, who sat with his back against a wagon wheel. He was about Herbie's age, round-faced and shifty-eyed.

"And this is Josh Tucker and his granddaughter, Lily."

Josh Tucker, a white-headed, whiskery oldster, seemed to have trouble getting his breath. And Lily Tucker—

Herbie looked at the girl again, and she smiled. Funny, but all at once the sun seemed to shine a little brighter, and Herbie suddenly didn't feel so tired. He dropped his gaze quickly, pretending he didn't see the smile. And all the time he kept reminding himself he didn't have time to sit around and look at a pretty girl.

"We're heading for Julesberg," Ross went on in his rumbling voice. "Figure to winter there. Then Fred's and me are going on to Oregon. I reckon Jed and Buck aren't sure where they're going from Julesberg."

The two drifters, Motter and Krumel, grinned faintly. They looked like the kind who took what they could get anyplace they found it. Herbie wondered where the old man and the girl were going, but didn't ask.

"Funny thing," he said, easing to the ground, "I'm on my way to Julesberg, too. Maybe I could travel with your outfit?"

"Sure," Ross said. He poured coffee into a tin cup and handed it to Herbie. "Ever been over the trail to Julesberg?"

For a moment, he was remembering the week he and Chuck had spent in Old Man's Canyon, hunting and fishing, exploring and making plans for the future. And, remembering, he felt a great inward crying, for Chuck, who was ten years his senior, had practically raised him from a pup.

"I've been just as far as Old Man's Canyon," he said.

Ross looked disappointed. "Thought maybe you'd know the trail," he said, scowling.

Herbie drank the coffee. It was what he'd needed to help fight the sickening tiredness. Suddenly the girl stood up and handed him a tin plate of bacon and fried potatoes.

"No, thanks," Herbie said, scowling fiercely. He'd come here to find a killer, not to accept favors. "I have my own grub in my saddle bag."

"Better eat it, son," old Josh Tucker advised. "Save you unpacking your stuff. We ought to get moving pronto. Wouldn't care to get caught in a blizzard along some of those mountain trails."

HERBIE glanced to the west, at the rugged range of mountains that stood between them and Julesberg. In the clear morning sunshine, snow gleamed on the higher slopes. He wondered if these travelers had any notion of what kind of storms they might run into while crossing over this late in the year. Even now there was a bitter feel of winter in the air, and a batch of gray storm clouds were frowning above the snow-capped peaks. Squatting down by the fire, he began to eat.

"It'll take a week of good going to get to Julesberg," he said.

No one answered. Herbie let his eyes drift to the girl again. The sunlight on her hair was worth watching. She was bundled up against the cold, but she looked slender and willowy anyway.

"Guess I was hungrier than I thought," he said, and saw the fine skin about her blue eyes crinkle as a smile came to her soft, wide mouth.

A few minutes later they broke camp. Ross drove the lead wagon, and Herbie rode on the man's right, telling him something about the trail as far as Old Man's Canyon.

Along toward noon he rode on ahead and located a clear cold spring. Here they stopped to eat.

Again Lily Tucker shared some food with Herbie, even if he did dig into his own pack. Watching her, he had a notion that she was some frightened and worried. Maybe, he decided, she was worried about the wheezy old man, her grandpop. Or maybe she didn't like the way Jed Motter and Buck Krumel kept eyeing her. Herbie didn't like that himself.

When they lined the wagons up for the afternoon drive, he saw that the girl was going to do the driving. That spooked him some, for they were getting into a strip of rough country.

"Guess I'll ride up here with you," he said. "If you run into trouble, maybe I can help you."

They hadn't gone a mile before he realized that she wouldn't need his help to handle the two teams. But he sat up there on the swaying seat with her most of the afternoon, encouraging her to talk about herself and the old man.

The Tuckers were from Missouri. They'd joined up with the Ross outfit on the outskirts of Canyon City, just for the trip through the mountains.

Josh was a carpenter by trade. There in the wagon, along with some battered furniture, was the big wooden chest in which he carried the tools of his trade. Lately his heart had been giving him trouble, along with attacks of asthma. So they'd set out for the desert country beyond the mountains, hoping the change of climate would be beneficial to his health.

"He gets awfully tired up in this high altitude," Lily said worriedly. "But after we get down to Julesberg and head for the desert I'm sure he'll feel better."

"Sure," Herbie said.

But he wasn't so sure. He was thinking about the thousands of feet they had to climb before they began the descent to the low country around Julesberg. Even a man with a good heart and sound lungs often found the altitude hard to take.

ALONG toward four o'clock, Herbie climbed from the wagon, mounted his roan, and caught up with Jed Motter's wagon. The red-headed man didn't seem overly pleased to have his company.

"Allison?" he said in a surly voice. "Seems I've heard that name before."

"I had a brother by the name of Chuck Allison," Herbie said. "Maybe you knew him?"

Motter shook his head and changed the subject. When Herbie asked him where he was from, the red-head clammed up.

Again they camped on Canyon Creek, this time at the Deer Ridge Crossing. Herbie sat watching Lily as she worked about the campfire. She looked tired. But she'd combed the tangles out of her hair, and she had a smile and a laugh for the Sorby's year-old baby.

Later he saw young Buck Krumel sidle up to the girl. He could tell by the set of her jaw and the glint in her blue eyes that she didn't care for Krumel's line of talk. Herbie wanted to step over and wipe off the smirk on the man's face with one of his big hard fists. But he didn't. He was here to find a murderer, not to get into a fight over a girl.

That night he slept in his bedroll, a little upstream from the camp. Clouds had scudded across the stars, and the wind was sweeping through the pines from the northwest like a flock of cold-fingered ghosts.

Lying there, Herbie sifted over the few facts he'd learned about the Ross outfit.

Otto Ross had picked up Motter and Krumel in Canyon City. They were two drifters who wanted to get across the mountains before winter blocked the trails. The two men hadn't met before they'd joined up with Ross, so they said. Of the five, one of these two was likely the man Herbie wanted. But yet he couldn't be sure —and certainly he had to be sure.

Then he got to thinking back over the past few days. He thought about finding Chuck's body, and the sudden sickish knot it gave him in the pit of his stomach, the terrible anger. Then there was the ride to Canyon City, somehow believing that in the trail-end jumping-off place he might find the killer.

All day and half the night he'd prowled the saloons and dancehalls, listening to the talk and watching for something that might give him a clue. Funny how at last he'd stumbled on to the trail of the killer, thanks to Vic Barker.

A long, lean cowboy, Vic looked like he'd been jerked backward through a knothole. He'd come to town with two months' pay and had been doing considerable celebrating.

"They threw me into the back room of the Golden Horn to sleep it off," he told Herbie. "Dark as all get-out in there. Thought it was a dream—two folks stepping into the room and whispering about getting out of town with two thousand dollars and crossing to Julesberg with a Ross outfit. One of 'em said something about letting a gent have it in the back. This evening when my head kind of cleared and I heard about Chuck, I figured maybe I hadn't dreamed it, after all."

"Hear any names, Vic?" Herbie asked.

"No names. Just the Ross outfit."

"I'll find the Ross outfit," Herbie said in a hard, flat voice.

"Kind of think one of 'em in there was a woman, Herbie, but I can't swear to it. Like I said, I was stinkero and thought it was a dream."

"Thanks, Vic," Herbie said. "Don't tell anyone about this. I want to haidle it my own way."

"Sure," Vic said. "I know how you feel about Chuck."

SO HERBIE had found the Ross outfit. Now to find the killer.

The money had been paid in fifties, twenties and tens, and made a bundle larger than a thief would likely want to carry in his pocket. That mean't he'd probably stash it away someplace until he reached Julesberg. But looking for the money in those five loaded wagons would be like looking for a needle in a haystack—even if Herbie found an opportunity to make the search, which wasn't likely. So there was but one thing to do—keep his eyes and ears open and hope that the killer in some way would tip his hand.

The next morning they crossed the foaming, rocky creek. Herbie rode beside Fred Sorby's wagon as they turned into the beginning of the switch-back trail that led toward timber line and the distant Julesberg Pass. Fred's wife, Flo, was riding inside the wagon, and the baby was crying fretfully. It didn't take Herbie long to discover that Fred was a whiner.

"Never did want to go West," he said. "But when you're hard up like me, you don't always have your say-so about things."

They were from Indiana, where Fred had been working for anybody who would hire him. Sizing him up, Herbie guessed he wasn't overly fond of work. Fred had been out of a job when his uncle, Otto Ross, had proposed moving to Oregon.

"I'm dog tired," he said, sighing. "Flo's worn to a frazzle. The baby's sick. All I ever have is hard luck."

Studying the man, Herbie found himself almost willing to bet that Fred hadn't had anything to do with Chuck's death. Yet he couldn't be sure. The Ross outfit had been in Canyon City a week—long enough for Fred to have heard of the cattle sale and gotten the lay of the land.

At the second switch-back Herbie pulled up and waited for the Tucker wagon.

Lily was driving. Old Josh sat on the seat beside her, gasping for breath, his face a pasty gray.

"How's everything going?" Herbie asked.

"Fine," Lily's voice said, but her eyes showed she was not telling the truth. "How much farther do we have to climb?"

Herbie pointed to a rugged knob in the gray distance above timber line.

"We have to skirt that," he answered. Then he glanced back to Canyon Creek, which lay below them like a thin twisting ribbon. "We're about half-way up," he added.

"It's beginning to snow," Lily said hollowly.

Herbie had already seen the few swirling flakes. He felt a little scared, for snow storms up here could mean anything from discomfort to death. But he grinned cheerfully and said, "Bound to run into some flurries when you're in the mountains."

That night they camped just below a a clump of twisted pines, at the very edge of the timberline. Darkness scudded in fast, and with it came a thickening of the snow. But by morning the sky had cleared, and the sun shone dazzlingly on a few white drifts caught by outcroppings of rocks.

"I reckon our bad weather's over," Ross said. "Hook up, men, and let's get moving."

Herbie climbed up into Josh Tucker's wagon and did the driving. Lily stayed inside the covered wagon, doing what she could to make her grandfather comfortable. Even above the protesting creak of the harness and the rattle of the wagon over the frozen ground, Herbie could hear the old man's harsh gasping.

PRESENTLY Lily climbed up on the seat beside him.

"How much higher?" she asked in a whisper.

"A thousand feet; then we level off."

"It's beginning to snow again," Lily said in a frightened voice.

"Yeah," Herbie said.

But something else had him more worried than the snow. One of the lead horses had begun to limp. It wasn't long after that until they began to fall behind the other wagons, and they didn't catch up until the others had halted to make camp.

The Ross outfit had reached the base of the granite knob that night and were holed up in a break in a stone bluff. The wind howled angrily above them, hurling the snow beyond their shelter. After eating supper, they huddled about the fire—all but old Josh Tucker, who hadn't left his bed in the wagon.

Ross filled his pipe and lit it with a coal from the fire. Then he turned to Lily, his mouth a hard, straight line.

"You can't go on with only three good horses," he said. "And the old man's done for if he stays up here another day. So it looks like you'll have to head back to Canyon City."

"She can't go back," Herbie spoke up quietly. "Those switch-back trails along the

Christmas Blues

By PECOS PETE

"I'm broke," said the cowpoke from Pheasant,
"And I may not find Christmas too pleasant—
'Cause a girl may be classed,
And judged by her past—
But a courtin' man's judged by his present!"

east slopes will be covered with twenty feet of drifted snow by morning."

Ross faced him angrily. The altitude made his heart pound, and if he moved around much he had trouble getting his breath. And there was the wind and the cold and the snow. He was scared, and his eyes showed it.

"We didn't ask Tucker to join us," he said harshly. "He did the asking. We didn't make any promises to look out for him or the girl. We're moving on at daybreak and we're moving fast. If the Tuckers can keep up, fine. If they can't—" He shrugged expressively.

Face chalk white, Lily leaped to her feet. "You mean you'd leave us, with a lame horse and my grandfather ill?"

"Lily, is something wrong?" Josh called from the wagon.

"No," the girl answered, and went running to the sick old man.

Herbie stared at the men sitting about the fire. There were Jed Motter and Buck Krumel, the two he suspected most of being Chuck's murderers; Fred Sorby, his weak chin quivering slightly, fear of the storm written all over his face; Ross, the man who bossed the outfit, hard and unbending; the woman, Flo, afraid for the baby she held in her arms. They would go on without the Tuckers, and maybe you couldn't blame them. Any delay now might prove fatal. And Herbie had to go with them, for if he didn't he might never catch up with the man who'd shot Chuck in the back. But the old man and the girl needed him. Maybe they needed him worse than he needed to find the killers.

Herbie picked up a sharp stone and made a deep curving scar in the ground.

"Old Man's Canyon is like this," he said. "It begins on the other side of this knob and drops about four thousand feet. After running north a couple of miles, it bends back toward Canyon City. There's an old hunter's cabin down there. Give us some extra supplies, and I'll take the old man and the girl down there. Maybe he'll get better, maybe not. But I can't figure any other way to—"

BUCK KRUMEL laughed suddenly; and Jed Motter said sneeringly, "Be right cozy, won't it? You and the girl and a sick old man."

Herbie hit him then and sent him rolling against the wall of the bluff. Cursing, Motter shoved to his feet and came back, his fingers clawing for his gun.

Ross moved fast. He came to his feet with an ax in his hand and leaped between the two younger men.

"This isn't the time or the place to do any fighting," he said harshly.

Breathing hard, Herbie slumped down on a wagon tongue. He was suddenly glad that Ross had stopped the fight before it got started. He was old Josh Tucker's only hope—the girl's, too, probably—and had no business getting himself shot. Lifting his eyes, he saw Lily climb from the wagon and hurry toward the fire.

"He seems much weaker tonight," she said. "You can't go off and leave us, Mr. Ross. You can't."

The flinty expression in Ross's gray eyes stopped her. Putting her hands to her face, she began to cry.

Herbie stepped over to her. He knew that all eyes were fixed on him, but he didn't care in the least. He hated the whole damned outfit, and one of them had killed Chuck, and someday he'd find out which one that was and kill him if it was the last thing he ever did. But right now—

"Don't cry, Lily," he said gently. "I'll stick with you."

That night Herbie didn't sleep. He just dozed a time or two. Maybe it was the wind, or the cold, or the feeling that he ought to keep an eye on Krumel, or his worry about getting the Tuckers to the bottom of the canyon. Anyway, he was still half-awake when he heard the girl scream.

He leaped to his feet, got tangled up in his bedroll, and fell flat on his face. Fighting for breath, he got to his feet again and stumbled to the Tucker's wagon.

By the time he got there Ross was hurrying up with a lighted lantern cutting a hole in the darkness. Fred Sorby came tagging along, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"What's the trouble?" Ross rumbled.

The wind howled away Lily's answer, and Krumel and Motter pushed up out of the swirling darkness.

Lily's face looked chalk white against the weathered canvas cover of the wagon.

"I heard someone," she gasped. "Saw someone climbing up into the wagon. At first I thought Grandfather had gotten up. Then I heard him cough in his sleep and knew it was someone else. That's when I screamed."

Ross muttered a curse under his breath. Holding up the lantern, he stared at the four men.

"No use asking any questions, I reckon," he growled.

The wind howled again, and a ragged strip of canvas lifted in a ghostly gesture.

"Maybe that's what you saw," Ross said.

Without a word, Lily drew back into the wagon.

Shivering, Herbie returned to his bedroll. For a long time he lay awake, listening to the wind and trying to figure out what had frightened the girl.

THE next morning it was hard to tell whether the sky was clear or cloudy, the way the snow kept sweeping across the frozen tundra with the blast of the icy wind behind it. The Ross outfit pulled out as soon as there was enough light to see by. Herbie and the Tuckers left the gorge a half hour later. The ground was swept bare, the trail not hard to follow. Beyond the knob Herbie swung the wagon to the south.

They reached the canyon before noon. Here they had to abandon the wagon. They used the harness to strap packs on the good horses' backs. They got the old man onto Herbie's roan and tied him there, a blanket-wrapped bundle.

It was treacherous going down the narrow, steep trail. Then the old man became too exhausted to ride, even tied as he was, so Herbie carried him the rest of the way. It was almost dark when they reached the cabin, which stood just beyond the first bend in the canyon.

The cabin hadn't been used for a long time. It had four bare log walls, a dirt floor, and no furniture but a stone fireplace opposite the sagging door. Pines grew along the narrow stream at the bottom of the canyon. Herbie hurriedly gathered up a blanketful of cones and soon had the place blazing with light and warmth.

Later, Herbie and the girl sat in silence in front of the fire. Down here there was no roar of the wind, only the cheerful murmer of fast-running water and the whispering of the flames.

"You've never told me anything about yourself," the girl said suddenly.

So he told her a little about himself, not much but enough to satisfy her curiosity for the moment. Then he got to thinking what it would be like to have her with him from now on, and felt a warmness steal over him. It had never occurred to him before that someday he might fall for a girl and want to marry her. But now—

Scowling, he shoved the notion aside. The important thing now was to get the old man and the girl back to Canyon City, then wait for a break in the weather and attempt to find the Ross outfit.

That night Herbie and the girl took turns keeping the fire going and watching the sick man. He was breathing easier down here, but Herbie didn't like the faint, irregular pulse beat. That alone told him it was touch and go as far as the old man's life was concerned.

Morning came with a great burst of sunshine right down the middle of the canyon. Herbie stepped outside. A great drift of snow lay beyond the stream, but where the cabin stood, in the shelter of the towering north wall, the ground was covered with lush green grass.

Moving around the corner of the cabin, he saw the five horses grazing a short distance to the east. Standing there in the warming sun, he began to do some dreaming like he and Chuck had done. Only it was the girl who was in his dream this morning. And, while he still stood there, she came out and gazed around in some surprise.

"Herbie," she exclaimed, "this is a lovely place."

He told her something about Chuck then. "We thought of taking the canyon over and doing some ranching down here," he said. "There's plenty of grass, and good winter shelter. But we would have had to blast out some places along the east trail between here and Canyon City before we could have moved much of an outfit into the canyon. So, when we got a chance to lease the Crooked-horn Range, we decided to let the canyon go for a few years."

IN THE afternoon he followed the canyon to the east to learn if the trail was open. Later, satisfied that they could reach Canyon City if there were no more drifting, he returned to the cabin. Watching Lily as she began to prepare the evening meal, he thought how it would be to make a home of this place—to bring in some lumber for flooring, lamps, a few pieces of furniture. But thoughts like these weren't for a man who had to find a murderer and kill him.

That night old Josh Tucker died quietly in his sleep. The girl discovered what had happened when she went to put more fuel on the fire. Her sobbing awoke Herbie.

The next morning he told her about the steep, snow-drifted trail, and how hard it would be to take her grandfather's body to Canyon City.

"Why not bury him here, Herbie?" she asked, dry-eyed now that she'd finished her crying during the night. "This is a beautiful place—he would have liked it here."

That was exactly what he'd hoped she would say. "I'll take two horses and go up to the wagon for tools," he said. "I'll make a coffin for him and dig the grave in that sandy slope back of the cabin under one of those big pines.

"Sometime," she said, staring out at the green pines and the glistening snow bank and the laughing stream, "I'd like to come back here, Herbie. When there are wild flowers blooming."

And I'd like to come with you, he thought, but he didn't say so. Afraid to look at her, afraid to dream of what might be, he went down along the stream to catch his roan and another horse.

When he reached the wagon, he found it completely buried under a drift. But at last he dug down to the old man's tool chest and pried open the heavy lid. He selected a saw, a hammer, a square and a plane. Then he began to search deep in the bottom of the chest for nails. And that was where he found the money, wrapped in a piece of an old slicker.

Too stunned to move, he sat hunched there in the wind and the cold. It was his and Chuck's cattle money, all right, in fifties, twenties, tens, just as the buyer had counted it out to them. Every cent of it was there, except for one of the fifties. The first thing he thought was that the old man had escaped him by dying.

Then the stunning shock began to let go of his mind, and he realized that Josh Tucker hadn't killed Chuck. Josh was old and sick and hadn't even owned a gun. Someone else had done it and had put the money into the chest.

He thought of the girl waiting down there in the cabin. Vic Barker had said maybe one of the two people he'd heard whispering in the dark room was a woman. Could it be that Lily had hidden this money for some man? Even if he didn't believe it, the thought gave him a cold, sickish feeling in the pit of his stomach. After stuffing the money into the big pockets of his sheepskin coat, he headed back into the canyon.

HE RETURNED to the cabin about noon. Lily had some food ready for him. He ate, watching her narrowly, not saying much. Any way he figured it, it didn't seem possible that she knew about the money. And yet—

He had half a notion to show the money to her and see how she reacted, but somehow he couldn't quite do that.

He built the coffin in a hurry, out of lumber he'd salvaged from the wagon. Then he climbed the slope and dug the grave in the sandy soil.

Lily left everything to him. She walked downstream to a big flat boulder and sat in the sunshine, the old family Bible gripped in her slim fingers.

"All right, Lily," he called when he was ready for her.

She came up to the grave and read some verses from the Book in a clear, sweet voice. After she'd finished she turned back to the cabin. But then she halted and said, "Herbie, I think we should start for Canyon City as soon as possible."

He understood. As long as her grandfather was alive she hadn't thought much about being here in the Canyon alone with Herbie. But now she knew it was time to move on.

"Sure," he said. "There'll be a moon tonight."

He began to fill the grave, and the girl walked away through the pines to the cabin. He had just about finished his work when he heard her scream. Afterwards he never could remember that plunging run down the slope to the cabin. But someway he made it without falling and breaking his neck.

The low sunlight blazed a bright path the length of the room. It fell against the girl's white face, showing the terror in her eyes. The man towering over her was Jed Motter.

Hearing Herbie's step, he let the girl go and whirled around. Seeing Herbie with nothing in his hands but a shovel, he grinned and dropped a hand toward the gun at his hip.

That was when Herbie somehow realized he still held the shovel in his big hands. In a single motion he brought it around and flung it at the man's face.

Motter lifted his left arm. The shovel caught him on the elbow. He screamed with pain and fell back against the fireplace. He went down hard, his head slamming against stone. Sighing, he lay still.

Lily turned to look at Herbie. She was trembling.

"He came in here and told me to hand over the money quietly or he'd kill me." She shuddered. "He must be crazy, Herbie, I don't have any money."

Herbie knew the score then. Jed Motter, somehow learning of the cash cattle sale, had killed and robbed Chuck.

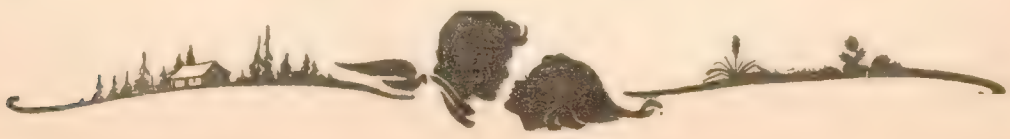
Knowing it wouldn't be safe to spend the money in Canyon City, he'd arranged to go to Julesberg with Ross. Then he must have gone back to town to see some girl, likely one of the Golden Horn dancehall girls, and Vic Barker had overheard their whispers in that dark room.

Not wanting to have that money with him just in case someone might come looking for it, Motter had slipped it into the old man's tool chest, figuring it would be safe there until they reached Julesberg. The missing fifty dollars he'd likely given to the girl, maybe with the understanding she was to meet him later in Julesberg. And Herbie knew now that it must have been Motter who attempted to climb into the Tucker wagon up there on the trail, hoping to recover the money.

Herbie shifted his gaze to the unconscious man. All he had to do now to even the score was pull the trigger of a gun. But, glancing at Lily again, he knew that wasn't what he wanted to do. He'd grown from a hot-headed kid to a man. He wanted justice, not revenge. He wanted to take the girl in his arms. And that's exactly what he did.

"But, Herbie," she said, finally pushing away from him to look into his eyes, "I still don't quite understand."

He told her the whole story of Chuck and the money. Then, while he was at it, he told her of his dream that included her, the canyon, and the years to come, and read her answer in the glow of her cheeks and the shine of her eyes.



NAN THOUGHT she had to guard the bridge against Joe . . . she didn't know she'd have to guard her heart too

Joe lifted Danny and brought him down against the bedstead

Love, Honor and Pay Toll

By Theodore J. Roemer

NAN PIERCE was washing the breakfast dishes that early morning in July, 1859, when a lone wagon came off the prairie to the east, dipped into the slight valley of the Little Blue, and stopped at the toll bridge.

Nan didn't see it at first. She was looking out the west window of the kitchen, and her gray-green, seventeen-year-old eyes were dreamy as she looked across the abyss cut by the Little Blue to the bright-lighted, rolling hills walking from the west. Someday soon Danny Dunn would be riding out of those hills, coming back from taking that wagontrain through, and she would go with him down to Independence. For she was "half promised."

She sighed happily, and her small red tongue touched her pretty lips teasingly, as if she could still taste the sweetness and the hot pressure of Danny's lips. And then, through the open door southward, she saw

the waiting wagon. She gave a little gasp, grabbed a drying towel, and ran out. Her father would whack her if she let a wagon through without paying. Well, maybe not, now that she was seventeen and "half-promised," but she wanted to help him make as much money as he could before she left him. Danny had said he'd be back the last of July.

A tall man stood by his team of grays as he read the sign. They were a little puzzling, all her father's listings.

"How much?" he asked, without turning. He'd heard her footsteps.

Nan pressed her lips together. They always asked that. Couldn't these yellow-clay Missouri farmers read? For, as she saw at a glance, that was what this man was. His wagon was old, though well-patched and in good repair; his grays were gaunted but young and clear-eyed; the black and white cow and the young red bull, to her eye, seemed to have good bloodlines. It looked as if he'd scraped all his savings together and had bought the animals for this trek to greener lands in Oregon.

But she suppressed her tartness. She said, "One dollar for team wagon and driver, twenty-five cents for each extra animal. That makes one fifty for your outfit, mister.

AT THE first sound of her voice he spun around, his mule-ear boots scuffing the gravel. His eyes levelled down upon her face. The prairie wind blew a lock of black hair over her forehead, and billowed the linsey-woolsey skirt hanging from her slender waist.

"Well, I—" He stopped, at a loss for words.

Nan looked steadily upward. He was tall, a good six foot. His shirt collar was loose and open, showing curly red hair on his chest. He had sandy whiskers, while the hair under his floppy hat was bleached almost white as if the closer to the sun this man got the more bleached his hair became.

Nan almost smiled, and then she caught the look in his eyes. It was a pert, cool look, a man's look, confident, bold, interested—very interested. She saw the eyes weren't bleached; they were a deep blue, almost as deep a blue as her mother's Dresden china. Now they were laughing down at her from each side of the wide, acquiline nose. He was a young man, but not a handsome man like Danny Dunn.

"I—" then he picked up his words— "I reckon, Miss, you'll just have to trust me." And he grinned.

"Trust you?" Then she looked to see if he meant it.

His slow grin widened. He made a deprecatory motion toward his patched levis. "Or maybe I better camp a while and think things over. Something might turn up."

Nan put her hands on her hips. "Well, Mister, all I can say is that, if you're starting out west with not even a dollar and fifty cents in your jeans, you won't get very far. And don't try and cross that bridge without paying, or Pa will come after you and make you pay double, like he did a whole train once."

She didn't add that it had happened some years ago, when Ma was still alive and Pa had still some gumption to him. He'd sort of run to seed the past couple of years. It was funny what Ma could do to Pa. A swish of her skirt around her hips, a look, and Pa would work all day or do anything for Ma. And it didn't seem like she was giving orders. She and Pa had built a nice cabin and made a good ranch and business out of this old Pottawatomie Indian bridge across the Little Blue chasm. Yes, Ma certainly had something that made Pa get up and go.

"No, ma'am, I won't." He grinned again, and wheeled his creaking outfit around toward the poplars lining the creek, a couple hundred paces from the ranch buildings.

She watched him all that morning while she was sewing on the white organdy dress in which she was going to get married to Danny Dunn someday very soon. She had purchased the material from a trader going through with a wagontrain months ago, and now the dress was almost finished.

But she couldn't see much of the man; he'd camped on the other side of the wagon, and though he'd started a fire she couldn't tell what he was doing. Toward noon she began dinner, looking frequently toward the

willow brakes stretching to the north along the river canyon.

The stock had broken out again last night, and her father had ridden out to round the cattle and horses up—that is, if some thieving Pawnees hadn't run across them and made away with them. Nan sighed. She bet if Ma were still alive that fence would have been fixed and good a long time ago.

She had poured the water off the potatoes and set them aside to cool, when a shadow fell across the sunny doorway. Thinking of Pawnees, she gave a start, but his drawly voice broke the stillness.

"Don't be alarmed, ma'am. It's only me. I came to see if I could borrow a pinch of salt."

"Salt?" She turned, and put her hands on hips again. "You're thinking of heading west without salt?" Then she stopped. She knew what he had been doing on the other side of that wagon. He'd shaved and taken a bath. He'd sewed the rent in his levis. And now he stood there gawky and grinning like a fresh-washed schoolboy.

IT ANGERED Nan oddly. She took down a partly-filled salt bag and handed it to him. "You won't have to pay for it."

"Thanks." He stopped and sniffed. The cooling potatoes smelled good; they smelled like a home-cooked dinner. But Nan pressed her lips tight. She wasn't inviting this wagon bum in for a meal. And when he saw no invitation was forthcoming, he turned reluctantly to go. But at the door he paused.

"I say, ma'am, if there are any chores I can do around here to pay for that toll fare, I'd sure be glad to do 'em."

"There are none," she said crisply. Then she heard Shep barking, up among the willows, and knew her father was back with the stock. She turned to getting her dinner. The man left.

"Who's the camper?" her father said, when he came in.

"Some wagon bum," Nan said, looking out the window and counting the stock. They were all there—six horses and three cows. She said, "Pa, you've got to fix the corner of that corral better this time."

Hank Pierce noisily blew the water from between his hands at the wash pump in the corner, reached for a towel, and, as he wiped his gaunt face dry, wordlessly watched the slim figure of his daughter bustling around the stove.

Nan didn't notice the look. She went on. "We need a bull, Pa. This camper has a young one, a fine one. You used to be good at trading fresh horses for tired wagontrain horses and coming out best on the deals. Why don't you do some dickering with this fellow for that bull?"

The look of a moment ago was gone from Hank Pierce's faded gray eyes. He looked at the table, more interested in food. "What with? The feller has horses. What more does he want?" He put up the towel and sat himself down at the table.

Nan put her hands on hips. "Land sakes, Pa, he probably wants lots of things we have here. He hasn't any money for one thing. He hasn't salt, even. That kind would want plenty, heading west. You used to be a good trader, Pa. And if you have to throw some money in there's that toll money you've been saving this summer."

"That's for your dowry, Nan. I don't want to touch it. Lord knows I'm giving you little enough as it is to get married on." He sighed, and reached for the meat and potatoes. "Nope, I reckon I'll get along, Nan. I don't need a bull." He began eating tiredly, and Nan sighed. She wondered how her father would get along when she was gone.

But her father went down to the man's camp that afternoon. He hunkered down on the warped wagon tongue watching the other patching a harness, and she saw them talking. After they had talked quite a while, the man hung the harness on a peg alongside the wagon, and they both walked back up the hill toward the barn.

Nan let her sewing fingers fall idle on the white organdy dress, and for the first time she noted a similarity between the man and her father. Both were tall, gaunt, shabby of dress. Both moved with the slow ease of men never in a hurry. Nan looked at the wagon. That would have been her

father twenty years ago, if he hadn't married her mother. Now he has a ranch, a good, big one—if he wanted to ranch it. Now he had a nice snug cabin, built just the way a woman would want it. Her mother had had good ideas as to what a cabin should be like.

He had a good barn, a stout hay shed, a pump house, some horses and cows. Two years ago the Pierce ranch had a big drove of horses. Hank Pierce was an up-and-coming trader along the wagon trail to Oregon. He had a huge herd of beef cattle. But since his wife had died, things hadn't gone the same, somehow.

Nan looked down at her fingers. In that moment she felt sorry for her father.

THAT afternoon her father and the wagon bum fixed the corner of the pole corral. And even with the distance from the house to the pasture, Nan saw it was a good job, and she was surprised. They didn't move very fast, they did a lot of talking, and when they were finished they sat down in the sunny doorway of the barn and kept talking, hats pulled down against the sun, a spear of blue-stem in their mouths, their eyes lazing on the horizon.

After a while Nan, watching them, began to feel a small anger. She didn't mind her father loafing—he had ridden hard after the stock since daybreak—but that good-for-nothing drifter should be on his way. He was too young a man to be idling around like this.

She saw his eyes wander to the ranch house every once in a while. When the shadows began to creep eastward her anger stirred warmer. Now she understood why he was looking up here. He was working a bid for supper out of her father.

Nan suddenly felt so coldly furious that she decided she wouldn't get them any supper. But when the little blue clock above her mother's Dresden china cabinet ticked off five o'clock she, with a dutiful sigh, put away the white dress with all the ruffles on it and built a fire to begin supper.

When the smell of bacon and hot beans went out across the shadowing ranch yard they came in, as she had known they would, and her father, half apologetically, told her he had invited Joe Manns in to "sup with us."

Nan lifted a shoulder, shrugged, and said curtly, "Wash up and sit down. I'll have it on."

But in the quick glance she did note a difference in the drifter's eyes. Gone was the pert, cool, bold look. He stood sheepishly, his battered hat in his long fingers. He looked once at her trim, slender figure and muttered something that sounded like, "Thankee, ma'am."

Nan pressed her lips together. *Ma'am!* Always it was that. Didn't he know that they called a married lady ma'am, and a young unmarried girl miss? Surely he could see she was young and single. But maybe they were so backward in that part of Missouri where he came from that to the girls there it didn't make any difference. Humph! She barely looked at him through the meal.

Her father talked of ranching, the dry spell, one of his lamed horses—everything but trading for that bull—and Nan ate in silent constraint. Something about this lazy Joe Manns made her angry, she decided. And her father was just like him.

Once Joe Manns nodded out the window toward the hill on the east around which the wagontrain cut its trace into prairie sod.

"What's that white hunk of rock up on that hill?" he asked. "Saw it when I came in."

"That?" Her father chuckled, for the story always tickled him. "I'll tell you, Joe. A year ago last spring a train came through here, a poor outfit, and there was a newly-wed pair in the caravan. Well, the lady took sick a ways back, and died when they were camped right down along that creek where you were. Well, instead of burying his wife decent-like, of course, and then going on with his bunch, what does that fool husband do but bury her on that hill, turn around, go back to Independence, and sell everything he had to raise the money for a tombstone.

"It cost him so much, in fact, he only had enough left, after all the fancy engraving was on it, to buy a wheelbarrow. And so help me, he wheeled that big stone all

the way back here in that barrow by hand, put up the stone, and then drifted on. He's gone, forgotten already, but I'll bet that stone will be there for five hundred years. Aren't some men dang fools?"

There was a long silence in the kitchen. At last Nan looked up. Joe Manns had stopped eating. He was looking at her.

She didn't know why, but warmth crept into her cheeks. And the next second she was furious. What was that big lout thinking?

WHILE she did the dishes they had an evening smoke, hunkered at the front stoop. Then, when the stars were coming out over the prairie, Joe Manns stood up and shook hands with her father and thanked him for the supper. And her father said it was all right, he'd helped him fix that fence. Nan saw the man look her way but she rattled the dishes furiously, and he said good-by to her father again and walked off into the growing dusk toward his camp.

Nan thought over matters as she wiped the last skillet dry. She decided the wagon bum had said that good-by to her father as if he wouldn't be seeing him again. And that meant that he was breaking camp early and moving on. The only way he'd be going would be west, which led over that toll bridge.

She thought of the sleek young bull. She thought of Joe Manns being broke. And she rightfully thought that this sort of an opportunity didn't come along every day. If her father didn't have sense enough to take advantage of the situation, she was going to do something about it herself. That lazy, no-good drifter wasn't getting over that bridge for nothing. He's eaten enough bacon, beans, fresh tomatoes, hot muffins, butter, and chocolate cake for supper to double pay him for the work he'd done on that corral. No, she was going up and lock the gate across that bridge.

White light lay on the prairie as she walked across it toward the bridge. The Little Blue chasm lay like a black wriggly snake on the land, but all the rest of the world was close—the white-lighted hills, the stars, the immensity of nature. Nan took a deep breath. She put her head back. It was a wonderful world.

Maybe tomorrow, or the next day, Danny Dunn would come riding across that white ribbon of bridge and take her in his arms. His lips would be hungry and sweet. She remembered them and she shivered. Handsome Danny. She had seen him only a couple of times, going through with trains the previous year. He was awful young to be a scout—twenty-one or two—but he could ride like the wind, and he was wonderfully accurate with the gun he wore at his belt. His laugh was a white slash across his dark, sunburned face.

He made lots of money taking rich trains through. That last night he'd stopped his train at Silver Creek down among the poplars, taken her into his arms up here by the bridge, and told her of all the wonderful things he'd buy her in Independence. His voice was soft, but his hands were hot wonderful things upon her body.

Nan found herself breathing deeply. She stopped and put her hands to her quivering breasts. She could feel her heart. And she laughed, joyously, and reached for the old wooden gate to swing it shut.

"Eevening, ma'am."

He was perched on the rail.

Nan gasped. Then she recovered. She was in the act of swinging the gate, so she tried to do it naturally. However, the heavy pole affair, not having been moved for over a year, got stuck halfway.

"Here you are, ma'am. Let me help you with that." He leaped off the rail and came quickly toward her. She tried to hurry. His big hands fell on the top pole beside hers; they touched. She jerked hers away. He pushed on the gate. His lanky body seemed to swing toward her, touch her hips. She stopped angrily, and he pushed the gate shut alone.

Her hands came up onto her hips. He stood there, grinning down at her like an overgrown boy. The rent in his levis had come loose from his labors with her father that afternoon; his bony knee showed. The wash-faded shirt, open at his neck, fluttered in the night wind.

"There. Reckon that'll keep the cattle from straying across tonight if they get out. But I don't figure they will. We fixed that fence pretty good."

Her fingers clenched. The big dope didn't even know she had come up here to close and lock the gate so *he* couldn't get across without paying his rightful toll. And he had even helped her close the gate!

She gave him one look, then whirled and half ran down the path toward the house. The absolute dumbness of some men made her furious even to think about. And this Joe Manns was absolutely the world's worst.

HER father was restless the next morning. After doing the small chores, he came back into the house and pawed aimlessly around. When he got the dish towel and helped her with the breakfast dishes—a thing he hadn't done since her mother died—she knew something was on his mind. Pa really was troubled, and she knew what it was. In a few days she'd be leaving him. What would he do without her?

Nan bit her lip and tried to puzzle it out herself, in the silence between them. Could he come into Independence with her and Danny? Maybe for the wedding, but after that—Somebody had to take care of the ranch, the stock. Her father would have to go back to his bachelor days. He couldn't live with them. She didn't know Danny too well, but she knew he wouldn't want her father around. She wouldn't herself, not at first for a while. Newlyweds want to be alone, she thought with a blush, thinking about herself and Danny.

But the breakfast dishes got wiped and put away with no words between them, and finally her father went outside. Nan, with a heavy, wordless sigh, picked up the white wedding dress from the box in which she kept it and began sewing on it. She felt sad. Her father was unhappy.

But as the neat, swift stitches fell from her needle, her mind soon dwelt on more pleasant things. And what could be more pleasant than thoughts of Danny Dunn? They would make a handsome couple, with Danny so tall and distinguished looking. That little black forelock would drop over his brow, his black eyes would dance with appreciation at her beauty in this dress, he would hold his arm just so. She would touch it, and they would move majestically up a church aisle toward an altar loaded with sweet-scented flowers . . .

She let her slender arms pause on the dress, and she dreamed. She smiled into the distance. It would all be so wonderful. "To love, honor and—"

There was a hammer pounding on wood in the distance. Her murmuring lips grew motionless. She peered through the growing heat waves of the ranch yard and saw Joe Manns up at the toll bridge, fixing the lock on the sagging pole gate.

Nan came erect in her chair; her hands went to her hips. What right did he have? Then she saw her father, seated on a rock in the shade, watching him. They were talking, and Nan's anger cooled as suddenly as it had begun. Well, at least something was being done around here.

She started to pick up the dress again, but once more looked at the tall wagon bum fixing the gate. She smiled with a little pity. Such a man was destined to go through life without a wife. For who would ever marry him? He had no looks, certainly. Ragged, gangly, easy-going, he didn't have *anything* to offer—except maybe that bashful, schoolboy grin. He wasn't very ambitious—look at the meager worldly goods he had. His fixing stuff around here was—well, merely an excuse to hang around and bum free meals. Humph! She would see about that. No more free meals for that wagon bum.

The little blue clock above the china closet sounded out eleven brassy notes, and she knew it was time to begin dinner. But not for that hanging-around Joe Manns! She put the dress into the box and began busying herself with the noon meal, wondering why Joe Manns got under her skin so easily.

SHE was just putting the coffee on the back stove to simmer, and reaching for the cowbell to call her father to dinner, when the roar of hooves sounded, coming across the toll bridge.

Danny! She knew it. She left the coffee

pot boiling and ran out the kitchen door. Sure enough! A tall, buckskin-clad man came loping across the bridge, and behind him came two others. He saw her and with a whoop swept his plains hat into the air, putting boot heels to his horse's flanks.

"Danny!" She laughed, though she really wanted to cry. Then he was yanking his horse to its haunches. He leaped from the saddle, and his long arms were around her, squeezing her, lifting her, drawing her closer and closer.

She was smothered by his hungry kisses. His lips were fierce in their seeking, and she had to arch backward to get away from them and get her breath.

"Danny, go easy," she said laughing. "We've got a long time."

"You're prettier than I even remembered," he cried. "You're such a nice armful, Nan. I want to kiss you and keep kissing you."

She felt the blush hit her cheek. Danny was holding her awfully close. And in front of these men! She leaned back in his arms, stirring to get loose. But at her body movement his long arms tightened the harder, and one of the men, still on horseback, guffawed.

"She's quite a filly, Highwide. A lot more'n you ever told us." The man threw back his head and roared again.

"Shut up, Pug."

Nan broke loose from Danny's arm. She didn't like the squat man in greasy buckskin leggings. His shirt was filthy and his little eyes reminded her of a laughing pig. Her hands started to come up to her hips, when her father and Joe Manns appeared around the corner of the house.

Her father and Danny shook hands, and Danny introduced the two wagon scouts with him. He glanced once at Joe Manns, and her father introduced Joe. But the three men, as if reading in a glance what Joe Manns was, merely nodded, not even offering to shake. Nan noticed a slight angry red came into Joe Manns's lean cheeks. He also didn't offer to shake. He looked at Danny Dunn with cold, level eyes, and Nan was surprised that, now that he had straightened up, he was taller than Danny.

"Come in to dinner," she said. "I've got plenty for all." They went in, Danny with his arm around her, although, blushingly, she had tried to work loose from him.

Her father washed up at the pump bench, then Danny and then Joe Manns, the latter very quietly this time. The other two men seated themselves directly down at the checkered cloth-covered table, and the lank one—a man Danny called Zeke—produced a bottle of whisky from beneath his shirt.

"If there's going to be a marrying around here we got to have a drink. Some glasses, gal. We packed four o' these out of Dobeytown, and this one's all we got left. Eh, fellows?"

Nan stood speechless. Drinking in the middle of the day? Way out here—and before one of her meals? She wouldn't have minded at the wedding, but—

DANNY must have seen her look. His arm stole around her. "Don't mind them, honey," he whispered. "They're just rough and ready wagontrain scouts." He bent down to brush her cheek with his lips.

But she turned away, saying weakly, "All right. I'll get you some glasses."

They poured drinks. Her father passed one to Joe Manns, but he shook his head. An angry flush was deep in his cheeks now.

"Here's to you and your little witch, Highwide. At last one's caught you."

"It's rotgut, but the best Dobeytown had," Zeke said.

Her father said nothing, and all four lifted their glasses. She saw Danny laugh as the fiery whiskey made him shiver. The two scouts promptly poured themselves another one, but Nan was relieved when Danny sat down beside her father and began eating.

Her Danny was far and away the most handsome man in the room, but something was troubling her. For the life of her she couldn't say what it was. Was it his coming here with those two filthy, loud-mouthed men? She saw the knife hilt sticking out of the buffalo tail sheath tied around Pug's fat, greasy neck. She saw the Green River blade thrust openly into Zeke's belt, behind his buckskin jacket. She saw the smooth-

handled revolver in its holster at Danny's hip.

Was all this rawness getting on her nerves? She was a frontier girl. She should be able to stand it. She had seen many rough men in the wagontrains. Some had stopped her dreams—

"Girl, go out and fetch that half-empty bottle from my right hand saddle bag." It was Zeke, pouring the last of the bottle into his glass. He had been drinking as he had been eating.

For an instant Nan started. She was sitting at the end of the table, not eating, just watching. The raspy voice brought her half to her feet.

Then a slow voice drawled, "Sit right there, ma'am. You, if you want your bottle, get it yourself. But I reckon you've had enough."

There was silence in the room. Every man looked at Joe Manns, who had stopped eating and was looking straight at Zeke.

Zeke's snaggle-toothed mouth dropped open. "Highwide, do you hear him? Do you allow that kind of treatment to your wedding guests?"

Nan caught her breath. She looked at Danny and saw a small frown puckered for a moment between his handsome straight brows. "Go get it yourself, Zeke. My woman isn't going to do your running around. Is she?" He leaned over and slid his fingers up her arm.

Suddenly everything was unreal to Nan —this kitchen, these men around the table, even the dishes that she had washed and wiped since she was a little girl. She got up. To shake the feelings, she went to the stove for the coffee pot.

The greasy fat man's voice came, "This is cooking, Highwide. She's got that little Mex wench you had in Laramie beat seven different miles."

"Hell, yes," Zeke said, "And as for wriggling her hips I'll bet this one—"

"Shut up!"

But the coffee pot sagged down on the stove. Nan thought her legs wouldn't hold her. She stood there and closed her eyes tightly.

She heard Zeke muttering something behind her. Then to relieve the tension, she heard the other man, the one Danny had called Pug, slap his fat hands onto the table and say, "That reminds me of a story, gents. Something about how Danny got the handle we hung on him, Highwide—for High, Wide and Handsome. Seems there was a barmaid in a saloon at Kearney and . . ."

It was a short story and had all the vulgarity of a saloon story, and when Pug ended with, ". . . and then she slapped him and said, 'I'll have you know I'm a lady,' " Zeke burst into a roaring laughter.

WHITE-FACED, Nan turned around. She saw Danny with his curly black head tilted back, laughing with Zeke. She closed her eyes and ran blindly into her bedroom.

She lay on her bed, sobbing. Something had gone wrong. This wasn't what she wanted at all. This wasn't the way she thought it would be. Those filthy, horrid, dirty-minded men—

The door creaked open. She looked up. Danny was coming into the room, his tanned, handsome face sober.

"Why Nan, darling, what is the matter?" He drew her to her feet, pulled her close. She felt his hardness; she moved to get away, but her movement awakened emotion within him. She saw it growing in his eyes.

"Don't," she said chokingly. "Not that, Danny. I don't want—"

"We're going to get married, aren't we?" he asked fiercely.

She felt his fingers digging into her body. She gasped, "I—I don't know—"

"You do know. Why do you think I came back here?" A harsh note was in his voice. His lips were bending toward hers. She felt herself being pressed backward toward the bed. She wanted to scream but no sound would come. She saw the light in his dancing, black eyes directly over hers. She was powerless, almost hypnotized, knowing what she faced. Again she tried to cry out, but she couldn't say a word.

Far off, as if in the distance, she heard sounds—as if of fighting. They seemed to come from the other room. Danny lifted his

head to listen for a moment, a smile growing on his tensed, hardened mouth. Then he leaned over her again.

"That cub out there is being taught a lesson by two of the roughest fighters that ever scouted for a train. Seems he didn't like the way they talked."

Nan swallowed. She looked up at his face, so close to hers. Was this a dream, that this could be happening in the middle of a July day, in her bedroom? Should she fight? She wanted to, but her strength was all gone.

A sound—closer. Someone had kicked in the bedroom door. She turned her head. Joe Manns stood in the doorway. A knife was sticking in his shoulder. His shirt was ripped off his back. There was blood over the red hair on his chest, and it ran down into the belt at his lean waist.

But it was his eyes that caught Nan. They were afire. His bleached hair stood up straight, and his bare hands were like a gorilla's long brown claws.

Danny Dunn let out a curse and, with a slithering movement, was away from her and off the side of the bed. His hand made a stab to the gun still in his belt. Joe Manns made a dive.

The gun roar and the crash of a man's body were as one. Nan sat up on the bed. She thought Joe Manns was killed. But the figure underneath heaved; it came erect, bearing Danny Dunn aloft. She saw Danny Dunn trying to club the spent gun down on the bleached head. She heard Danny Dunn screaming wild curses. Joe Manns got his fingers in the buckskin. He lifted Danny Dunn higher, saw the iron bedstead, and brought his burden down across it.

Danny Dunn's screams cut short. Nan took one look at the suddenly whitened face and fainted.

THE late afternoon prairie wind was dying. Everything was still over the land, as the shadows lengthened. Nan lay quiet in the willow chair on the porch. Something had gone out of her this afternoon, something of her old belligerence. A woman can take just so much in the face of the rawness of men, and then she has to open her eyes to the fact that she is merely a woman, the weaker one.

Danny Dunn would live, but he was all broken up inside. He couldn't even sit his horse straight; his two friends had to hold him. They had gone a long time ago. The other two had taken quite a severe beating too. Even her father had helped.

She had bandaged Joe Mann's knife wound and he had put on one of her father's shirts. Then they had gone out to the barn to do some talking. Always they were talking. Nan curled her feet still farther under her and watched the prairie darken. There was a nameless empty ache in her breast and she didn't know what it was.

Footsteps came around the corner of the house. It was her father and Joe Manns. Joe was in the lead, but at the sight of her curled up there, pretty and soft-looking, he stopped and gulped. Her pa gave him a shove.

"Go on, Joe. Shucks, we've been talking trading for two days now. Reckon it's all in the deal, but you got to make it stick with her."

"What is this?" Nan asked. "You two traded for that bull?"

Joe Manns gulped. No words came. Then her father blurted,

"It's like this, Nan. Joe wants to buy me out. He's got a thousand cash. He'll give me his outfit and the choice of two more horses on the place. I always wanted to head West, now that Ma is gone. I can catch up with that bunch from Illinois if I hurry. The only rub is—well—damn it, Joe, you gotta go on from here."

Joe opened his mouth, then closed it.

Nan stared. "Do you mean to say you have one thousand dollars?"

"Yep. He'd saved it."

Nan said levelly, "Do you have salt in your camp?"

"Salt?" her father said. "He's got a ten-pound sack of it."

But she was looking at Joe. "Last night at the toll bridge—you knew I'd come up there."

At last Joe found his tongue. He hung his head and what he said was, "Yes, ma'am."

Nan's father had disappeared. Something in his daughter's voice had told him this was no longer any place for him; it was a soft something. And Joe Manns seemed to hear it also.

He lifted his head. The schoolboyish guilt was disappearing. The light in his blue eyes, that had been there the first time he'd looked at her, was coming back —a man's look when he looks at a girl's pretty figure—bold, interested, confident.

She saw him approaching, looking down into her eyes. She saw the confidence growing. She moved, just a little, on the wide willow chair. It was suggestive of something, and Joe Manns was no longer a schoolboy.

Minutes later she stirred in his arms. She looked up into his eyes, his china-blue eyes, that went right to her heart strings. She had loved him all the time, she knew, but her stubbornness wouldn't let her admit it.

But now she laughed softly.

"What is it, Nan?" he asked huskily.

But she laughed and reached up to kiss him once more. It wouldn't do to tell him Without knowing it, she had been like her mother. A swish of her skirts about her hips always brought results.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. In oldtime cowboy slanguage, a "croopy" was which of the following: (1) a fish, (2) a homesteader trying to raise crops on dry land, (3) an outlaw horse with his ears cropped to identify him as such?

2. The 47th and 48th stars in Old Glory represent what two southwestern states?

3. I heard an oldtimer say: "The winter of 1886 was sure a cow-skinner!" What did he mean?

4. Admiral Wm. Parsons, who activated the A-bomb over Hiroshima, grew up in what small New Mexico cowtown where a famous outlaw was killed in 1881?

5. Give the common names for the following western animals: (1) wapiti, (2) pronghorn, (3) lobo, (4) Mexican donkey.

6. In trail driving lingo a *cuna*, coonie, possum-belly and skunk-boat were all terms for the same thing. What?

7. What did the oldtime cowboy often refer to as "prairie strawberries?"

8. Seton Village, near Santa Fe, N. M., was established by what famous naturalist, now deceased, as a "Center of Indian Culture?" He also once wrote stories about the lives of western wild animals.

9. It is estimated that about three million bats fly out from what famous Western caves every evening, and back again the next morning?

10. The Jornada Federal and State Game Refuge is in the San Andres Mountains not far from the White Sands, in what state?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 110. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Anne poured coffee from the pot she had kept ready

BLIZZARD BARGAIN

By V. E. Thiessen

JIMMY DUNN turned his face away from his tormentor, toward the frosting cabin windows. Temper seething, he ran one lean hand through the cocklebur stiffness of his close-cut hair. When he had fought down the anger he turned back toward the big ranch owner opposite him and spoke.

"Maybe so, Mister Rutland, maybe so. I can ununderstand how you feel. Before I got interested in wheat I had punched cows for ten years, since I was thirteen. But there's not much use talking about it. Crop raising is here to stay, and so is barbed wire."

He felt the savage twitch of the rancher's shoulders. "Dirt-stirring squatters!"

Jimmy flared back at that. "Don't for-

RUTLAND HAD CALLED Jimmy a coward . . . and he was almost willing to die rather than admit he was wrong

get I'm a dirt-stirring squatter myself."

"Forget?" The words brought no compromise from George Rutland. "I sure don't forget."

Jimmy stared at the older man. Outside, the storm was slowly building. The wind whined once, growing colder, and some of the gray had already filtered into the comfort of the rancher's cabin.

Jimmy could feel the tautness in his shoulder muscles. Angry almost to the point of rashness, he thought, if only the prideful fool weren't Anne's father. The tension began to go out of him as he remembered that, and that her mother was dead. He was aware of the rawhide toughness of Rutland's body, remembering that the rancher had fought his way up to wealth and power, and remembering, too, that the old man was the last vestige of a die-hard race.

What little range war there had been between cattleman and nester here had come and gone. The twisted and barbed strands of number nine wire were a familiar sight; even George Rutland had twenty miles of drift fence, that made one V and then ran ruler straight until it hit the chill country. And the dirt-stirring squatters, as Rutland called them, were firmly entrenched and were building schools and churches in the valley below. Jimmy's winter wheat was lush and green. He frowned. Surely Rutland knew all this.

Let it pass, he thought, as you've let other remarks pass, because of Anne. Now he felt himself relaxing as memory pictured her fine soft hair, and the bone-slim sweetness of wrists and ankles that brought a tightness in his throat each time he looked at her.

RUTLAND said, "I wonder if a good, well-placed kick would insult you?"

The shock of his words held Jimmy motionless for a moment. This wasn't just anger at nesters, this was something personal. Here was trouble he didn't understand. He felt the blood rushing into his face, and he fought the fists that clenched themselves at the sides of his worn levis.

Rutland went on. "This is a hospitable country, and it goes against the grain to tell a man he isn't welcome. But if I never see you on this ranch again it'll be too soon."

Jimmy managed to keep his voice even. "I reckon that's straight enough. But the why isn't straight. Is it because of Anne, because I'm a nester?"

The old man's voice was still curt and cold, yet it had lost the taunting quality, as if now at last this was something that had been finished. He said, "I'd hoped my daughter would have the sense to fall in love with a cattleman, but a nester would have been all right—if he were a fighter."

The words hung between them a moment. The clouds outside darkened; the ranchhouse interior grew duller and grayer.

George Rutland swung full face toward Jimmy, and his voice grew scornful. "This is a hard country, mister, and them that don't have the courage and the will to fight will have their hearts and their bodies broken, and their families will break with them. I don't mind your being a nester, but by thunder a man ought to be proud of what he is! You've been letting me insult nesters for three weeks running. You took remarks a man that had fight in him would have knocked me down for making."

Bitterness seeped into Jimmy. He'd taken a lot from Rutland, all right, because he was all the family Anne had. And now the old man was condemning him for it. Jimmy couldn't figure out just what to do about it.

Rutland went on. "So you aren't welcome, shuffling around my daughter. If you take my advice you'll drift east, like so many of the young men nowadays. This country's too big for a meek man."

Jimmy cried, "Now, wait a minute," and he took a step forward, his knuckles tight with anger. Then he stopped. Even if he took a swing at Rutland now, it was too late. There was all that history of the insults he had accepted, not wanting to quarrel because of Anne.

Rutland said, "I'll tell Anne why you've gone, and what was said here. If you

cross me and meet her in town I'll ride in with a horsewhip. Good-bye, dirt digger!"

Jimmy whirled toward the door. Another moment and he would have clubbed a fist into that hard old face, and while that would have made him feel better, it would have solved nothing.

OUTSIDE the cabin, he swung up on his steeldust. The sky was leaden now, the temperature growing more and more chill. The wind had calmed, and the sky hovered hushed and expectant. Another kind of storm was getting ready to break around him.

He raked the steeldust savagely and felt the big mount shoot forward like something out of a gun. He pounded forward until the horse was blowing hard, and then he pulled down to a walk. He didn't feel any easier.

The storm hit then. It began easy, at first, too easy, with big white snowflakes drifting into the hushed air. As Jimmy rode, the wind began to swirl the thickening flakes. Then, a mile from Rutland's cabin, Jimmy ran into what seemed to be a solid wall of white, the edges of a cold, wind-lashed vortex of violence. He shivered and drew his coat together. The steeldust, head down, could barely see. Only the fact that they were moving diagonally with the wind kept the mount going.

Jimmy whistled. No sound above the whistling wind came out of his lips, and the whiteness of his breath was lost in the white coldness of the storm. It had been snowing here for some time. The snow was drifting like powder, the temperature well below zero. It reminded Jimmy of the big blizzard when he was in his teens. A lot of cattle had been lost then. He shifted uneasily in the saddle. A lot of cattle would be lost in this one. It was lucky for Rutland that the canyons of Concho creek lay downwind. Cattle could drift before the storm and eventually find shelter in the canyon maze. In the open they would bog down in the snow, freeze, and eventually die.

The steeldust jumped sideways, nearly pitching him off, and snorted. A great shape materalized out of the white, almost beside them. Jimmy caught a glimpse of gleaming eyes and the long twisted horns of one of Rutland's cattle, drifting before the wind like a white ghost. Then the white curtain came between them and there was only the storm again.

Unease gnawed at Jimmy. There were times when he could see through patches in the storm, and times when it closed in on him entirely. If it got much worse he could be lost, and a man lost in this might well freeze to death before he got into the valley. He brought the geography of the land into his mind, trying to place the canyons and Rutland's drift fence.

Rutland's drift fence! The full meaning of that was like a fist pounded into his cold mind. Rutland's cattle couldn't get to the canyons. That drift fence was designed to keep them out, to make round-up easy. Cattle would be piling up against that fence, piling up in the wide V that was its downwind extremity, and freezing. And the storm hadn't been like this back at Rutland's cabin. Rutland might not figure out the danger until it was too late.

Jimmy considered. Another shape, wild-eyed and long-horned in its white blanket, spooked the steeldust, but the horse was too worn by the storm to do more than take a startled leap. Jimmy worried the idea. He ought to go back to the cabin and warn Rutland. As he considered, his mind saw a new danger. The fence ought to be close hereabouts, and if he rode the horse into it the steeldust might be injured. Ordinarily it was no problem. He would ride up, take a few staples loose with the fence pliers in his saddlebags, stand on the wires, lead the horse across, and then staple the wires back. But if one of these cattle materialized at the wrong moment and spooked the horse into that barbed wire—Jimmy shivered. He didn't like the thought of being afoot in the storm.

THE storm opened one of its thin spots, and Jimmy saw the posts ahead, and the cattle that were drifting against the fence, and turning down toward the V of the fence.

Relief surged through him. He would follow down to that flat V of fence intersection and cut the wire so that the cattle could drift to safety. Then he could turn back and follow the drift fence. It took a roundabout way, but it came up behind Rutland's barns, and from there he could reach Rutland's house and tell the rancher what he had done. Regardless of personal matters, the rancher would not want Jimmy to be lost and freeze to death in the blizzard. Also he ought to let the rancher know that the cattle were safe.

He reached the V without trouble, though the cattle were thickening, and a few were already down. The snow was thin enough so that he could follow the fence slowly, pausing when it closed in on him, and moving forward when he could see again. He reached the flat V of the fence and cut the wire, moving back now toward Rutland's place, until he had cut some two hundred feet of opening. The cattle began drifting past him, and he rode over to those who were down, shrieking above the storm until he had them up and drifting again. Satisfaction warmed him, though Rutland's words still rankled. Maybe this would make the big man feel a little kindlier.

He followed the fence back through the shrieking storm, and after what seemed like hours and could not have been more than four miles, the storm began to thin out. He pushed on and saw Rutland's barn ahead. It was snowing at the barns now, but not violently, the blizzard itself seemed to be moving downwind and yet expanding rapidly, so that its edges crept toward the Rutland cabin.

Jimmy pushed through the snow to the cabin door. The door opened, and a girl's voice cried, "Jimmy!" Surprise and pleasure were blended in the voice, so that he knew Anne's father had told her of the quarrel, and that he was not at all expected. He grinned at her, seeing the slim shape of her body, and the warmth in her eyes. "Storm drove me back," he said.

"I'm glad!" She moved toward him, and footsteps sounded behind her.

George Rutland, coming into the room, said in a great, angry voice, "Now what in tarnation thunder—" and stared at Jimmy.

"That storm's a regular heller. It's like the big blizzard when I was a kid. Your cattle were drifting into the fence and stopping, lying down, ready to freeze. I cut the fence so they could drift into the canyon country."

Jimmy could see the big rancher's face tighten with concern. A blizzard could hit a man hard. Rutland remembered the big one too. His head turned, then he walked to the door and stood peering out at the drifting snowflakes. It didn't look bad outside. He turned back toward Jimmy and his voice lashed out in a great gust of anger.

"Now, by thunder, if it had been that bad I could have cut the fence myself. You might have been meaning to be helpful, but the plain fact is you scare easy." Jimmy could see the whiteness of Anne's face as her father's voice became harder, colder. "Well, now we'll just pick up some wire and ride down to the fence. Since you cut it, you can help fix it. I reckon I'll take a chance on a little piddling snowstorm like this one."

Jimmy felt his cheeks flaming. Unable to speak, he just looked at the rancher.

"Come on, dirt grubber," Rutland said.

Jimmy followed. Once Rutland got down to the drift fence he'd change his tune soon enough. And if he didn't, Jimmy didn't care if every damned head froze into an ice cake.

HE FOLLOWED Rutland out to the barn, and waited, seething, while Rutland slung two long coils of wire from the saddle.

"Better follow the fence back," Jimmy suggested.

"Follow the fence! If we just drift downwind we can't miss it, and that saves a couple of miles." Rutland swung on him. "Damned if I don't think you're scared of your own shadow. Come on!"

They swung out across the ranchyard. Jimmy could see the blackness gathering ahead of them, the borders of the blizzard itself. He saw Rutland tense in the saddle, as the rancher realized that the weather

might be worse than he suspected. Then they were riding into the storm.

The blanket of cold blindness closed around them, the wind shrieked, and Jimmy could see Rutland hesitating, could see that the old man was struggling with the fact that he might have been wrong, and wondering if he should admit it.

Jimmy came closer and shouted. "Come on. We want to get that damned fence fixed before the storm really starts." He could see the rancher stiffen with pride. He grinned, then rode on.

They were about halfway to the fence when the wind shifted and fell on their flank with a new violence. Now the snow was so thick that they could barely see each other, riding as close as they dared. The shift of the wind made calculating direction more difficult, but they had miles of fence to hit, so it really didn't matter. Jimmy didn't worry, until they had ridden a half hour too long. Then Rutland stopped, a dim white-coated figure, and shouted, "Should have hit it by now."

"A little more left," Jimmy yelled back. "I think we're off course."

In five minutes they hit the fence. They hit it almost parallel. Somehow they had become turned in the storm and had been nearly riding along the fence. The cold was a thing evil and alive, striking through their clothes. Rutland gestured and swung down from his horse.

Jimmy shouted, "That break ought to be to our left," and he heard Rutland shout, "Get down!"

He got down. Rutland stood, holding his horse, a great white mound in the storm. Jimmy pushed close so that they stood in the lee of the horses, almost face to face.

Rutland shouted, "Reckon the storm's worse than I thought. We'll leave the fence down and get back home."

Jimmy nodded. There had been no apology, but he knew what that had cost the old man's pride. "Couldn't be much worse," he agreed.

The storm made him a liar then. It shrieked over them in such a way that everything before had been unimportant. They couldn't see the fence, could barely see each other. Rutland moved shoulder to shoulder with him, shouted in his ear again. "We'll lose the fence riding. Hell of a job, but we'll have to walk it and lead the horses."

Jimmy nodded. Five miles of blizzard would take hours, but they could keep moving, and keep clinging to the wire with their gloves. That would lead them back. A mistake now had but one meaning—an icy death somewhere, when horse and man could not go on. They moved forward into the blind white shriek of the wind.

ABOUT half an hour later they came to the break in the fence. Jimmy was leading, and he stopped, feeling the broken ends of the wire. He stopped, uneasy, his chilled body growing tight with fear, and peered into the white blindness. He could see nothing. The next post might have been a hundred miles away instead of fifty feet. One step right or left and a man could miss the post and go blundering off, lost in the storm. He fought his memory. Even if he hit the post he would have the same problem with the next post. He had cut five sections free.

Now Rutland was beside him, and he was shouting the problem into Rutland's ear.

Rutland shouted back, "Give it a try. If we miss we can mount up and ride in a circle."

Jimmy held him back. The plan might work, he realized that it ought to work. But he was seeing the cold blackness of the snow, seeing nothing, and realizing that a man could be turned around in fifty feet. The horses were bone weary and frightened. If they missed, Jimmy didn't like the thought of trying to circle into the fence again. If they circled through the gap there was no telling what might happen.

Rutland said, "Let's go," and Jimmy held him back. Rutland's shriek was like the wail of the wind. "Still yellow, huh? Still a damned cowardly dirt digger!" He shoved Jimmy's arm aside.

Jimmy whirled on him, twisted a hand in

his coat collar, pulled the rancher close until they were face to face, white breath to white breath. "Shut up and let me think!"

Rutland tore loose. "I'm going on. I won't stand here and freeze." Jimmy clung to the big man, and felt the fist Rutland used to club him loose.

But he couldn't let the other man take the chance. He waded in, swinging, all the repressed anger boiling out, striking at Rutland, at fate, at the storm. They fought in the storm, circling in the blindness, tearing at each other like animals. Jimmy

"Where's the starter?"

felt the breath come, sobbing through his lungs, burning with the coldness. Blows in the cold were more painful than usual. Rutland was a fury of arms and legs, and Jimmy felt himself falling into the snow.

He got up out of the drift and caught Rutland just as he was striking out into the blindness, and they fought again like mad white bears in some polar blackness. This time Rutland went down. Jimmy screamed at him. "Now, damn it, wait there and let me think."

Rutland struggled up. Jimmy could hear his breath, but the younger man had forgotten to defend himself. The idea that had plagued him was coming clear. Remembering, he whirled suddenly on the defensive again, but Rutland was standing quietly, watching him and waiting.

He said, "Get the fence wire. We can do it with the wire." Fear made his throat dry. "If we can find the horses,"

They were alone in the storm. The horses were probably standing some five feet away, but they had fought until all direction was gone. He gulped. Something moved and he took a step forward. It was one of the mounts. He let out a great, frosty, shuddering breath. Both horses were together, reins across the fence where they had been thrown.

JIMMY took down the coil of wire and tied it loosely to the post, shouting his plan to the rancher. Leading the horses, they paid out some seventy feet of wire, more than enough to reach the next post. They began then, still leading their horses, to swing a giant blind arc in the storm. After a time the wire hit the post and they backtracked, cut the wire, tied onto the post and began another arc.

There were times when they thought they could never reach that last bare post. But after two hours they stumbled against the unbroken wire that stretched beyond, and would lead them to Rutland's barn. Somewhere along the line Jimmy had picked up a stick, so they mounted up and rode along the fence, Jimmy riding lead. He let the stick rattle along the barbed wire, guiding him like a blind man's cane.

They came at length, huddled and near frozen, to the great bulk of Rutland's barn, and rode out of the bleak whiteness of the storm into the warm, hay-scented mouth of the structure. There they swung down, stiff legged and slow. Jimmy pitched hay for the horses, Rutland unbridled them and tied them to the manger's edge. It was warm here in the barn. Security flowed around them. Finally they came out of the barn, orienting themselves toward the house. The distance was short, the outbuilding so well known that even though they could not see the house there was no danger. Moments later they were stomp-

ing into the cabin and Anne Rutland was helping them off with their coats and pouring coffee from the pot she had kept ready. They drank the coffee.

Jimmy held the cup in his hands, feeling the warmth, shaking with the suppressed fear that was foolish now they were safe. Holding the hot cup, he knew that he had been scared stiff. Maybe Rutland was right, after all. Maybe he didn't have what it took for a country like this. He knew Rutland had seen his hand shaking, and he could not look at the rancher.

He heard Rutland get up. Involuntarily he turned toward the movement and his eyes met Rutland's. Rutland had a strange expression. The rancher put out his hand, touched his daughter's arm, and spoke to her.

"Guess we'll have to put this darned dirt grubber up. He can't get back through that storm." He moved toward the door, paused briefly. "Reckon he can sleep in my bed. I'll take the spare cot."

It could have been only Western hospitality. Anne said, "Yes, father," and waited, her body taut.

At the door Rutland whirled and glared at them both, his brows drawn together, his voice harsh, still speaking to his daughter. "I reckon if the dirt grubber is going to take everything I got he might as well start with my bed."

His shape vanished, his footsteps clomping in the next room. Jimmy turned to Anne, seeing the warmth and the question in her eyes.

Slowly, his mind still on Rutland, hearing all the things that Rutland had implied, knowing how the speech had torn itself out of the older man, Jimmy said, "It took a big man to say that. Sometimes you forget how big the old bullnettle is."

And then he felt Anne's hand on his, and turning toward her he forgot George Rutland entirely.

Coming up in the next issue

THE WILD STREAK

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A Magazine-Length Novel

By LLOYD KEVIN

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By MICHAEL CARDER

THE RED MASK

A woman's intuition can be deadlier than a man's guns

A Western Short Story

By DOROTHY ROSEBOROUGH

The Fiddler

Those pale green eyes brought a message of danger and death

BOB MARTLEY entered the saloon so he could look after his older brother, Jamie, who was prone to take on more liquor than he could hold. Bob, at sixteen, was too young to drink in public even in the wide-open town of Red Bank, Texas. Had he known he would see the man who would haunt him for most of his life, he would have stayed away from the Prairie Bar.

He noted at once that Biff Bagle, the saloonkeeper, had a new musician, a fiddler who made the string sing like something out of heaven. Bob wandered closer, surprised that the player was no more than two years older than himself. The fiddler was tall and supple, and his hair hung about his neck in blond curls. He looked up, and without being conscious of it, Bob shuddered. The musician's eyes were the palest green the young cowhand had ever seen. And they were cold and unblinking—and sinister. Bob backed away, a feeling of unease in him. He had sometimes felt that way on meeting strangers, and the people had usually turned out to be bad.

The next day he heard the news: Biff Bagle had been killed and robbed of several hundred dollars. A one-time partner of Biff's was jailed for the murder.

a true story of the West by Ferris Weddle

Bob found out that the fiddler, Len Parks, was gone. He felt that the fiddler was guilty, but no one would listen to him.

Twenty years passed before the fiddler again entered Bob's life—but during all that time he had never forgotten the green-eyed man. It had been proven that Biff's ex-partner had had nothing to do with the crime. Meantime, Bob got married.

One day Bob heard that a new music teacher had arrived in the community. Jamie's son George was signed up for lessons, and so was Bob's son Mike. When Mike reported that the new teacher, Mr. Duncan, had yellow hair and real funny green eyes, Bob felt a chill pass along his spine. He went to see Duncan. It was Len Parks—the man he was sure had killed Biff. But Parks did not remember him, and he had no evidence, so Bob didn't say anything to anyone except Jamie.

"We'd better watch him," he warned.

It was soon evident that it might be necessary, for Len Parks, alias Mr. Duncan, had taken an unusual liking to Jamie's son. George had always been a moody boy, and now he began to spend more and more time on his music lessons.

"I'm going to make that hombre leave the country," Jamie said.

The two brothers confronted the music teacher and revealed their knowledge of his real name and their belief that he had killed Biff Bagle. The fiddler agreed to leave.

THE PASSAGE of years brought indirect news of the fiddler to Bob, as the man moved about the country teaching music in various communities. But it meant little to Bob until he heard that George, nearly full-grown now, was making long trips away from his home. He returned dressed in the finest clothes, riding the best horses, and with plenty of money to flash. He would say nothing about where he had been.

Bob abruptly remembered the pale-green eyes of Len Parks, the fiddler, and he blurted out his hunch to his older brother.

Jamie laughed. "You let the man haunt you, Bob." And there the matter rested.

Bob moved away, buying a ranch in New Mexico, and eight busy years slipped by. Through letters he heard that young George had a music store in the town near Jamie's Texas ranch. Then one day Jamie wrote the disturbing news that Len Parks had been seen visiting George.

A little later more news came. George's store had burned down, and everybody thought Parks had something to do with it. George had left without saying where he was going, Jamie's letter informed Bob.

George Martley disappeared for five years—and then one night there was a knock on Bob's door. A pale, bearded figure stood weaving in the moonlight. Bob did not recognize him until he spoke.

"I'm sick, Uncle Bob. I need help . . ." George's words faded out and he would have fallen except for Bob's hands.

George hovered between life and death for several days, burning with fever, his thin body shaken with a hacking cough. Bob had not informed Jamie that his son had been found. It appeared that George would get better—until the day two strange, tough men came to visit him.

"We'll see George alone," one said.

"I ain't leaving," Bob said grimly.

George coughed, his voice weary when he spoke. "It's all right, Uncle Bob."

After the men had gone, George called Bob in and told him the story, but Bob had pretty well figured it out. Len Parks, alias Mr. Duncan, had been the leader of a national gang of outlaws. Many of his recruits were young boys like George.

"Those men came here today to kill me," George said. "But you scared them out of the plan. Besides, they know I'm finished." He looked at Bob, his eyes feverish. "Parks is a big man now—grown rich off the money I and others have stolen for him."

"I'll see that he gets what's coming to him," Bob promised.

George shook his head. "Won't do any good. No one will believe you. Most of the gang is gone now, and none of them will talk. I wouldn't except I'm—I'm finished."

With those words George Martley died, and with his dying the shadow of the fiddler left the Martley family.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF SAGITTARIUS

NOV. 23 to DEC. 22

ON DECEMBER 8, 1848, the first gold from California was deposited in the United States Mint. From that day forward the rich resources of an entire continent were at the disposal of a nation. Men born under that same sign are equally willing to give their all to a cause they believe in.

The Sagittarius man has a deep sense of loyalty and duty. He will always try to do what he thinks is right even if it is not to his personal profit. A man of the highest ideals, he still has a sense of humor. He is never dull or stodgy and wins people to his cause because he is likeable, rather than belligerent.

A man born under this sign recognizes that logical persuasion is better than force, and he turns his energies to sports to avoid physical violence. When he is roused to righteous wrath, however, never tangle with a son of Sagittarius.

He never loses his head, and even when not in top condition he can outsmart any of his opponents.

The Sagittarian is always one of the boys. Well liked by members of his own sex he completely charms women with his strength, helpfulness and sense of humor. He is the life of the party when he chooses to be, but never minds sharing the spotlight with others.

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"I can't leave," Nora said. "It would be running away."

Crisis at Cross Creek

By J. L. Bouma

EARLY Tuesday morning Emmet Macgrew took the crew out to haze beef from the breaks above Green Mesa. The job would take a few days, and he was glad to get away from the ranch. Lee Carey stayed behind. He had a reason. Before leaving, Emmet stopped by the bunkhouse and said, "Say, hello to Nora for me, will you?"

"Sure, kid." Lee was shaving, and he didn't look at Emmet. He was a blond young man with the kind of looks that had half the girls in the country dreaming about him. "I'll tell her."

"I'll be back for the Sunday wedding," Emmet said, and left.

EMMET WAS WILLING to take second best where Nora was concerned . . . till her first love came back to claim her

A half hour later, when they were jogging up Timber Grade, Emmet saw a buckboard coming toward them. Hugh Reeves, who ran a mountain ranch near Big Pine, was driving. He called Emmet aside.

"Where's Lee?" he asked. "I paid him cash for his shorthorns last Saturday, and he promised delivery Sunday. But I haven't seen hide nor hair of that beef."

Emmet's eyes toughened. He was a long man, long of arm and leg, and his face was long and wedged down to a shovel jaw. "I'll see Lee and find out what this is all about," he said grimly.

He called Slim Yonkers and told him to go on ahead with the crew, then rode back to the ranch at a gallop, wondering why Lee had sold his cattle when he needed them to start his own spread.

Both men worked for the Circle-C outfit. Emmet was range foreman. He was a reliable man who studied a job of work before he piled in and got it done. Lee was just the opposite. There was a weakness in his make-up that cracked after a certain pressure. He had quit the ranch twice to take other jobs, saying they paid more and he could get ahead faster, but he had been fired both times. Then there was the time he took off to go prospecting. He wanted Emmet to quit and go with him, saying they might get lucky and strike it rich.

Emmet said no. "You go on if you want. I'll stick with the ranch. I don't believe in a man turning from one job to another."

So Lee, a month's wages in his pocket, went to Cross Creek to buy supplies. Three days later he was back, his grin sheepish. "I never did get out of town," he said. "I got to talking with some of the boys at the saloon, so—" He shrugged.

Emmet talked to Miller, the Circle-C owner, into rehiring Lee for the third time. Miller said no, but Emmet argued. So finally Miller said all right. "I'm doing it because you're asking me. Otherwise I wouldn't have him on the place for a gift."

NORA CHRISTIE had come to Cross Creek to visit an aunt and uncle, and she stayed three weeks. Neither Emmet nor Lee would have been likely to meet her if it hadn't been that her kinfolk and the Millers were friends. As it turned out, Nora spent a lot of time at the ranch. She was a shapely girl with blue-black hair and a delicately-made face, and it was plain from the first that she was taken by Lee.

Everyone there noticed that something happened to her when they first met, but Emmet noticed it most of all. He thought her the prettiest girl he had ever seen, but when he saw the longing in her soft grey eyes as she looked at Lee, he turned away. Being struck by the sight of a woman's face was a new experience to him and he didn't quite know how to handle it.

Lee knew he had captivated her; it showed in his cocky walk, his grin, and his sly way of winking when her name was mentioned. He spent all his spare time with her. He taught her to ride; he took her on picnics and the roundabout dances. Emmet stayed away from them as much as possible. He knew better than to rouse his hopes when all they were based on was a dream.

Before she returned home to Boston the Millers gave her a party. Nora and Lee were together from the time she arrived, and Emmet couldnt help but notice that Lee's cocky swagger was missing. Maybe knowing Nora was making a man of him, Emmet thought, and hoped it was true. Nora deserved the best.

After the picnic supper Emmet wandered across the yard, and Nora joined him. "I haven't seen much of you." She smiled.

"Been pretty busy," Emmet said.

"You don't talk much. You're not at all like Lee."

Emmet looked at her. "There are times I wish I were."

"No," she said, smiling. "I like you the way you are. You've been with Mr. Miller quite a few years, haven't you? Are you always going to work for him?"

Emmet shook his head, light-hearted with sudden hope. Before he knew it he was telling her of his plans. "I've been taking part of my wages out in beef, running 'em with Circle-C stuff under my own brand. One of these days I hope to file on graze south of here—"

He broke off, for he sensed she was only half listening. Her hand on his arm was light as a feather, but it shook him as nothing else ever had. "Lee can do it too," she murmured, looking off somewhere into the darkness.

Just then her aunt and uncle joined them, but for Emmet the moment alone with her had ended when she mentioned Lee's name. He had guessed the truth all along, but it was then something tore in him and made him realize how deeply and terribly he loved her.

After she'd gone the change in Lee was marked. He went about now with an air of grim purpose, and did the work of two men. When payday rolled around he stayed locked in Miller's office for an hour. And when he came outside he was grinning.

"Five dollars is all I'm drawing this month, and every month from now on," he told Emmet. "I'm taking the rest of my wages in beef. One fine day I'll be running my own spread. I mean it."

Emmet said he hoped so, and wished Lee luck. But he had his doubts. So did Miller.

"He asked for a chance and I gave him one, but I dunno," Miller said. "He's never yet amounted to a hill of beans."

"He'll make out," Emmet said.

Miller gave him a sharp look. "It isn't him I'm worried about," he said, and walked away.

BUT he needn't have worried; Lee stuck to the promise he had made himself. There were paydays, when the rest of the crew got ready for a night on the town, that he grouched, but he always got over it. The first time Emmet noticed that pressure was building up in him was when Lee, for no good reason at all, took a whip to a balky horse. This was during fall roundup, and it surprised Emmet because Lee had always been gentle with horses.

Emmet jerked the whip out of his hand. "What's the idea?" he said.

Lee turned on him, and Emmet could see that his face was pale with rage. For a second he glared at Emmet, then sort of shook himself and said thickly. "Come payday I'm busting loose."

He didn't. But Emmet sensed that the pressure was still there. Nora wrote three, sometimes four letters a week, and Lee answered every one. Then, for days at a time, he would not write at all, while Nora's letters never ceased coming. And Emmet, hating himself, would wonder what she had to say, and wish she were saying it to him.

The new year came in. About the middle of February Nora's kinfolk visited the ranch. They were moving to Wyoming, the uncle told Emmet. "Too bad we can't be here for the wedding," he said. "Nora wrote us. It's to be in June."

Since Lee hadn't said anything, Emmet didn't feel he had the right to mention the subject. Then Mrs. Miller spread the news and Lee confirmed it sullenly. "Just like her to tell everybody."

"Man, you haven't got much time," Emmet told him. "You'd better get to work."

Lee bristled. "What the hell do you think I've been doing?"

"Sure," Emmet said. "But you have to get a place ready for her. You'll have to file and build. That section south of here's still open."

"I thought you wanted that graze."

"Don't worry about that. It's you that's got to be thinking about the future. You won't have enough cattle come June to make a living, so you'd better figure on keeping your job here and riding back and forth morning and evening."

Lee balked, and Emmet asked him what he expected. "How do you think Miller got started? He lived in a soddy for six years before he built the big house. You go down tomorrow and file, and I'll help you build."

"I haven't got money for lumber."

"Build it of logs," Emmet said. "Plenty of timber in the hills. We can work evenings and Sundays. Have the house ready to move into by June." Emmet gave him a hard look. "Haven't you thought about any of this?"

"Oh, sure," Lee said vaguely. "Sure I have. I'll file on that land first thing tomorrow."

All that spring he worked in spurts. There were times when it seemed to Emmet that he was carrying Lee on his back, and then he'd wonder dismally how Lee would be when he was on his own. But he knew it was Nora that he really worried about.

They finished the house by the end of May. It wasn't a very big house, but it would do. "We can spend the next two Sundays raising a shed and a corral," Emmet said.

Lee groaned. "I haven't had a day to myself since I can remember."

But, by and large, everything seemed to be in fine shape. Nora was due on the 16th, and Mrs. Miller had invited her to stay at the ranch, where they would hold the wedding.

THAT'S how things stood the morning Emmet learned Lee had sold his cattle. Now, galloping into the yard, he was relieved to see Lee's horse tied by the bunkhouse. Emmet swung down and stopped in the doorway, Lee was making up a blanket roll.

"What're you doing?" he asked.

Lee flushed. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Explain that," Emmet said softly. "And while you're at it, explain why you sold your cattle."

Lee stared at him, lips thin, nostrils pinched. "All right," he burst out, "since you're here I'll tell you. I'm not going through with it. I slaved a whole year of my life away, and the way it looks I'll be tied down with work from now till the grave opens. Yeah, I sold my cattle—mine, do you hear? And now that I got a few dollars I'm going places and enjoy life. I sure ain't gonna be tied down here, with nothing to look forward to but work and more work."

"You asked Nora to marry you," Emmet began.

"That just happened. We got to writing and it just happened. A man can change his mind."

"Does she know about this? Did you write and tell her?"

"She'll find out today when she gets here," Lee said shortly. He picked up his rifle and blanket roll, but Emmet stopped him.

"You're not quite man enough to face her, is that it?" he said in a soft and vicious voice. "Now you listen to me. That girl's in love with you. She's coming here expecting to get married, and you're going to meet that stage if I have to drag you to town behind my horse. You aren't going to break her heart—"

"You're sweet on her yourself, aren't you?" Lee asked, with a sneer.

Emmet stared at him. Then he slapped Lee. He slapped him across the face with all the power of his arm and shoulder, and drove Lee to his knees. Blood spouted from Lee's nose and his eyes were glassy.

"You stinking sidewinder," Emmet said softly. "You're gonna meet that noon stage and, so help me, if you make Nora's life miserable, I'll kill you. Now get squared around while I hitch up the buggy."

He turned and started out. He did not see Lee rise and swing the rifle, a twisted look of rage on his bloody face. He felt only the shock at the base of his skull, and when he tried to turn and fight back he couldn't quite make it. . .

When he woke up Lee was long gone, and his first impulse was to run the man down. Then it struck him he wouldn't be doing Nora much of a favor by forcing Lee to go through with the marriage. The logical thing was to tell her the truth. He climbed on his horse and rode to town.

The stage had just pulled in when he reached the depot. He noticed the two

Saratoga trunks lashed to the roof of the coach, and thought with quick dismay of all Nora had planned and looked forward to. He watched her step down into the June sunlight, an expectant smile about her mouth, and come toward him looking light and lovely.

"Emmet," she said, and pressed his hand. "I'm very glad to see you." She looked around. "Where's Lee?"

Emmet drew her aside, away from the curious, staring eyes of idlers. He said, "Lee's not coming, Nora."

"But why—" she began. And suddenly something in her eyes told him she knew. "Oh, no," she said faintly. Her face pale, her eyes closed, she came against him for a moment. "That poor boy," she murmured. "So he ran away. Is that it?"

"Don't go feeling sorry for him," Emmet said gruffly.

"Oh, but I am." She bit her lip. "Think how awful it must have been for him—how awful he must be feeling this very minute." For a moment it looked as though she might cry, but she gave a shaky laugh instead. "I have two suitcases in the coach, Emmet, and the trunks are mine."

EMMET hesitated. "You're welcome at the ranch, of course. But I—"

She looked at him. Tears had formed slowly in her eyes. "Do the Millers know, Emmet?"

"Well, no. You see, it just happened a while ago."

"Just a while ago," she murmured. "So he waited until the last minute and then lost his—" She took a long breath. "You're right, Emmet. "I think under the circumstances I'd better stay in town. You can explain to the Millers that I'll see them sometime this week."

She stood there, a strained smile on her pale face. Had Lee been around Emmet would gladly have killed him. He said, "The Hobson House is a nice hotel to stay for a few days."

"I'll be here longer than a few days, Emmet."

He felt his heart quicken. "Then you're not going back home?"

"Oh, it's not that I care what people will say, but I just couldn't go back, don't you see? And I can't leave here right away for that same reason. It'd be like —running away."

"Of course it would."

"Dear Emmet," she said. "I knew you would understand."

That was on Tuesday. Emmet rejoined the crew. He knew there would be talk, that it was inevitable and could be ignored. But he wondered if Nora could stand the gossip. It was not a pretty thing for a woman to live through, as Mrs. Miller told him.

"The child would be better off to leave," she said. "Perhaps she could join her aunt and uncle in Wyoming."

"Why should she leave?" Emmet asked bluntly. "She hasn't done anything."

If the gossip hurt Nora, she gave no sign of it. Emmet saw her on Saturday. "You haven't been in," she said. Then, before he could answer, she smiled and said, "I know. 'Been pretty busy.' So have I, Emmet. Mrs. Hobson's cook has been ill, and I've taken over the kitchen. And do you know—" she laughed—"I received many compliments on my cooking."

Emmet cleared his throat. The dream rose up in him again, and with it his hopes. But he could not speak now. It was too soon, too soon. He said, "You ought to open a restaurant. Not many places a man can get a good meal in this town of anything but steak and potatoes."

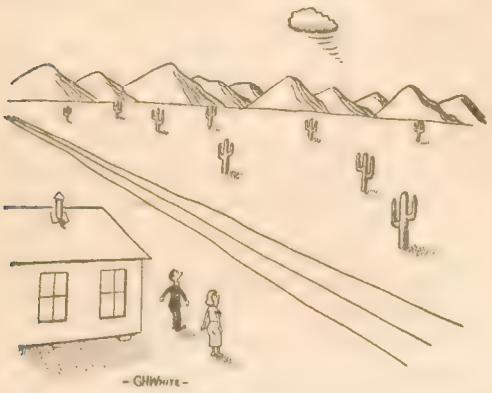
She regarded him thoughtfully, and Emmet's heart sank. He had just been talking. "I have a little money saved," she said. "I thought—planned—" She broke off, and he looked away from the pain in her eyes, knowing he could not speak for a long, long time, sensing she was still in love with Lee.

Emmet kept busy most of the next month checking Miller's vast herds scattered throughout the mountain meadows. He stayed away from town, wanting to give Nora a chance to get settled in her

new surroundings. He learned that she had opened a small restaurant and was doing well.

"Quite a few drummers come through town, Emmet," she said, when he saw her again. "And then there are so many bachelors that like home cooking. Why, I've had to hire two girls since I opened." She was silent a moment. "I learned about the—house, Emmet. Would you think me foolish if I asked you to show it to me Sunday?"

Emmet didn't know what to think. The following Sunday he drove her there in a hired buggy. She was pensive and strangely silent. "You did most of the



"Here comes the rainy season again."

work, didn't you, Emmet?" He said nothing. "It's awfully small. But then I dreamed too much. I wanted a large house, Emmet with two floors, and lots of big, airy rooms."

"That's quite an order," Emmet grinned.

"For the children," she said, and closed her eyes. "If you dream hard enough you can hear their feet on the stairs." She was crying, and she looked away from him. "Please take me back, Emmet."

IT WAS then he knew he could never take over that south section. If his hopes came true he could not ask her to live where she had thought to live with another man.

But there was good grass and water west of Green Mesa, and here Emmet filed. This was in August. He had a long talk with Miller. Over 200 head of Herefords wore his brand now and he had a tidy sum in the bank. He wanted to take off till fall roundup, and build his house. Miller agreed.

It would be a man-sized job, for Emmet knew now what he wanted in a house, and what it entailed. He knew also that the results would be worth the effort, for he expected to live and to die in the house.

He decided to build on a knoll, surrounded on three sides by live oaks. The view was one of rolling meadows, laced with streams. He built the foundation of natural rock, the first story of peeled logs. He was up before the sun, and his shadow could be seen long after dark, in the glare of two hung lanterns.

He hauled flooring and siding from town in Miller's big wagon, for the second story was to be of clapboard. Nora was never out of his mind. When he learned she had gone to a lodge dance with a clerk from the bank, he was filled with dismay.

Mrs. Miller told him, when he stopped on his way to town. "Oh, yes," she said. "She's attended different socials with several nice young men." She gave him an appraising look. "If I were you I wouldn't let any grass grow under my feet."

Emmet knew she was right. Nora knew nothing of how he felt, or that he was building the house for her. He would see her today, he thought, and ask her to go riding with him Sunday.

It was noon when he arrived in town. He drove the big wagon directly to Cramer's lumber yard, where he had previously ordered his roof joists. Cramer's three yard men were eating their midday meal in the shade of the high fence. They were laughing. As Emmet climbed down from the high seat he heard one of them say, "She's a right smart filly. Don't know how the boys're doing, but since she's been stood up once—hell, a man can always try."

Another guffawed. "That why you've been eating your suppers at her place, Dirk?"

"Like I said, a man's got to try. Can't

figure why Lee Carey ran out on her. He could at least have had his fun."

Emmet gripped the edge of the wagon seat and lowered his head for a second, feeling shivers run all through him as though he were cold, thinking, Count ten, man, or you'll kill him.

When he faced the men his voice was under control. "You talking about Miss Christie, Dirk?" he asked.

Dirk, a big bull of a man, started to speak. Emmet grabbed him by the throat, smashed him up against the fence, and commenced to beat him to a bloody pulp. After trying to stop him, one of the others hit him with a two-by-four. Emmet stood there, breathing hoarsely, his eyes wild.

"Load those joists," he said. "And next time I catch sight of him it'll be the same thing all over again. Tell him that when he wakes up."

He didn't go see Nora after that. He guessed she would hear about it, though, and the thought sickened him. There was no doubt in his mind that she would think him a fool.

He worked on the house through September, seeing only those of Miller's crew that happened by. Fall crackled in the air, the first snows fell in the high country, and again it was roundup time. The house was up but all the finishing work had yet to be done. Emmet left it at that. He worked through roundup, noticing that Nora's name was never mentioned in his presence. For all he knew she might be already married, or gone back home.

CATTLE prices were right and Miller drove a big herd to railhead, forty miles away. One day, at the shipping pens, Emmet learned from a casual remark that Lee Carey had returned to Cross Creek and had been seen riding with Nora. His built-up hopes shattered, Emmet returned to his unfinished house. He told himself he was a fool, and he lost all heart for work. It was only through dogged determination to finish what he had started that he kept working on the house.

He scraped and sanded the floors and polished them until they shone like dull gold in the lantern light. The days he spent putting up a barn and sheds. By the end of October he was dull-eyed with exhaustion, but he never faltered.

One morning he woke and saw that a light snow had fallen. He had slept cold that night. So far he had cooked his meals over an open fire in the yard, but he realized that he needed a stove now, and that he would have to go to town to get one.

Half reluctantly, half eagerly, he hitched up the light wagon he had bought, already arguing with himself as to whether or not he should stop by Nora's restaurant. If she were still there, he added to himself, and sensed a flash of panic. But if she were it would be unseemly not to stop and say hello. "After all," he muttered, "as far as she's concerned we're just friends."

As he climbed to the seat he thought of Lee, and he sat quite still for a moment before going back after his gun. He was not in the habit of packing iron and the shell belt with its loaded holster felt awkward around his waist. He drove away from the house. The snow had not reached town, but a stiff, cold wind clawed at the dust, and fingered the manes of his team. He parked in the lot back of the hardware store, selected and paid for his stove, and walked on down the street.

Three horses stood at the hitch rack in front of Nora's restaurant, and Emmet glanced at them before he stepped inside. It being midmorning, there were only three men at the counter, but Emmet needed only that first split second to see that one of them was Lee Carey. The old murderous rage rose up in him.

Lee was grinning up at Nora. When she saw Emmet her mouth opened on a small gasp, and then she smiled. Emmet scarcely noticed. At her exclamation, all three men had turned their heads with terrier-quick alertness.

Then Lee recognized Emmet and grinned crookedly. "I'll be damned if it isn't old Emmet," he said and laughed. "How's it going, kid? I hear you're building a house."

Something in Emmet's face dragged his voice to a stop. Emmet said nothing. He realized that the three men were together,

and he saw the change in Lee Carey. The cocky expression was gone; there was a pinched tightness to the face now, and the eyes were cold, sardonic, and wary as a wolf's as they shifted to the gun at Emmet's waist.

Emmet said carefully, "Don't talk to me. Just keep your damn mouth shut and stay out of my way." He stood there at the end of the counter. Across the room they stared at him. One said something to Lee in a low voice.

Lee grunted, then threw a leg over the bench and rose. "Come on, boys," he said in a tight voice. "Nora, I'll be seeing you."

As he passed Emmet he appeared to hesitate. For a split second their eyes locked. Nothing of their old friendship, their years together, remained; Emmet saw an expression of hatred and envy flash nakedly at him. Lee went out and the others followed, boots scraping, spurs jingling. The door slammed shut. Emmet watched them mount their horses and ride away.

THEN he looked at Nora. "You've been seeing him, haven't you?"

"Once," Nora said, and flushed. "Was it foolish of me?" He did not answer. "He was here last month for a while. We went riding. Then he went away. He showed up again yesterday." Emmet watched her. He said nothing. Something vaguely troubled moved painfully across her eyes. "He wants me to sell out and meet him in Denver. He says he has a good job with the railroad."

"That's nice."

She bit her lip, her eyes stormy. Then she smiled and said brightly, "You haven't told me about your house. Would you show it to me?"

"It's not finished."

"Oh," she said.

He felt his lips shape a stiff smile. "Well, I have to be going. I thought I'd stop in and say hello." He nodded, his neck rigid, and swung outside. He thought she called his name but he did not look back. Jerkily but without pause, as though he were guiding himself along an unseen wire, he turned into a saloon and bought a bottle. Then he drove home, placed the bottle on a bench in the kitchen, and worked furiously to put the stove into place.

It was well along in the afternoon by the time he finished the job. Then he stood there for a moment, searching his mind desperately for something else he could do to keep him busy. There were many things, but suddenly he knew it was not enough. He opened the bottle and filled a glass, raised it to his lips and put it down again, thinking, If I start that, there's no telling what I'll do. He saddled his horse and rode to Miller's place as though he were being pursued.

He stayed for supper, not knowing what it was he ate, forcing the food down, hearing his voice, his laughter, scarcely aware of what he said. He realized vaguely that he would get over this, but at the moment he needed people around him, and he faced the ride home with a mixture of dread and apathy.

It was late, and a light snow was falling, by the time he climbed the trail to the knoll. The house loomed out of the pale, swirling blackness. He rode past it around to the shed. "Emmet!" the voice said. It was like the crack of a whip. "Sit tight!"

Suddenly he saw two figures converge on him soundlessly, the shapes of men carrying rifles. They closed in, and he came slowly alert, aware that the voice had come from the corner of the house behind him and that he was trapped.

"I owe you something, and I've been paying my debts," Lee called harshly. "Watch this!" Emmet turned his head, stunned, as flame suddenly leaped along a torch; he watched the torch sail through a window. The next instant his horse erupted violently under him as he roweled the animal savagely, his free hand clawing at his gun.

The man to his left was barely ten feet distant. His rifle cracked as the horse plunged into him, and his terrified scream was suddenly cut short as the animal stumbled and rose, hoofs slashing. The second man fired. It seemed to Emmet he heard that shot at his shoulder at the instant pain knifed his back. He felt the horse go out from under him and he struck on his side,

still clutching the gun, as a third shot exploded in the snow-swirling darkness.

HE SAW the man outlined against the flames that belched from the corner of the house. The man moved, and Emmet fired and saw one knee break. He fired again and the man slid down, as Lee shot toward Emmet from the side. Emmet rose and plunged toward the shed. Lee fired twice more, the bullets slapping close, and Emmet swung and saw him in the backwash of the flames, crouched in the snow.

Standing straight, Emmet walked toward him. Both men fired as one. Emmet felt Lee's bullet jerk at his arm, felt the arm go limp, and fired again. Lee still crouched there. Slowly he tumbled forward on his face, and quivered, and then was still. Emmet stood there. He thought he heard hoof sound. He felt something in him slide. Then there was wet snow against his face, and then nothing . . .

He was sitting up in bed, in Miller's ranch house, his arm and shoulder swathed in bandages, and she was looking at him with wet eyes and saying, "Oh, you fool, you wonderful fool! Don't you think I know? That beautiful house—you built it for me, didn't you? And you fought that man in the lumber yard because of me."

"It was foolish," he said.

"Was it?" He said nothing. "But you'd do it again, wouldn't you?" He still said nothing. "I should have known all along. I tried to tell you yesterday. But you were awfully grim, and you walked out. I tried to tell you I wasn't going to meet him."

"You saw him again."

"Once," said Nora. "Maybe I was curious, or maybe I needed to make sure. But there was nothing left. We'd both changed. And he lied to me. He didn't have a job with the railroad. He and those other two held up the Durango stage last week. The money they stole was in their saddlebags. Lee hated you for being what you are—a man, something he could never have been. So he burned your house and tried to kill you."

"Our house," Emmet said, and he smiled.

Nora looked at him with fierce pride. "I love you," she said. "I think it started when you met me at the stage. The house doesn't matter. We can always build another house."

He drew her down and kissed her, his eyes burning, the happiness leaping from his heart and flowing through his tall, lean body.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 91)

1. (3) An outlaw horse with his ears cropped.
2. New Mexico and Arizona.
3. That it was a hard winter which caused many cattle to die. Such carcasses were usually skinned to save the hide; thus the use of the word "cow-skinner."
4. Ft. Sumner, New Mexico.
5. (1) Elk, (2) antelope, (3) wolf, (4) burro.
6. A cowhide stretched under a wagon in which to carry cowchips or scraps of wood picked up along the way for cook-fire fuel.
7. Beans.
8. Ernest Thompson-Seton.
9. The Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico.
10. New Mexico.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

IN a contest to elect the "grand old man of rodeo" there might be several nominations, but we think the winner would be Fog Horn Clancy. There's practically no job in rodeo he hasn't done, including (though many people don't know this) riding and roping.

His greatest fame—and his name, of course—came from his stentorian voice. In the days before public address systems, Fog Horn was the greatest announcer in the business. He not only had no need for the yet-to-be-invented microphone — he wouldn't even use a megaphone.

He got the name long before he got into rodeo, however. And he got the voice soon after it changed from a boyish treble. As a youngster picking cotton in Texas he'd holler for water, and the water boy could hear him farther than he could see him.

It was when he was 16, hawking the Dallas Morning News, that a newsboy for the opposition paper scornfully said he sounded like a foghorn. This was meant as a jibe, of course, but Clancy didn't mind, just so long as that foghorn sold the Morning News. And he's been Fog Horn Clancy ever since.

But when he was born he had a dignified name, William Melton Clancy. This blessed event took place in Georgia in 1882. There Fog Horn had a grand total of three years of schooling before his father died and he became a breadwinner, sweeping out a cotton mill seven days a week at 15c a day.

Young William was mighty proud of his earnings, but it wasn't enough to keep the family going, so his mother moved to Texas, where he worked in the cotton fields for a while. When he was 14, he became a cowhand on a ranch.

He was 16 when the Spanish blew up the battleship Maine. He quit his job, determined to "Join up and kick hell," as he put it "out of the Spanish Army."

But the U. S. Army had other ideas, chiefly that Clancy was too young. So rather than go back to the kidding he'd surely take on the ranch, he started selling papers.

But when rodeo time came round he entered both riding and roping, won a little in both events, and never again hollered another "Extra!" He went all over the state to wherever he heard of a rodeo, and finally arrived in San Angelo. Except for that first success he hadn't done too well, and he was known far and wide as a cowboy with an unsteady seat on a horse and a mighty bellow as he went through the air.

This gave the somewhat unscrupulous manager of the San Angelo rodeo an idea. He saw to it that Fog Horn's first horse was one which would dispatch him quickly, and after that happened as scheduled, he offered the lad a few dollars for calling out the events to the crowd. The arrangement worked out beautifully and a new career was born.

Clancy liked the idea of sure pay and no bruises. He continued to roam around Texas and the Southwest, looking for rodeos, but now he was getting jobs instead of bumps. He thinks he was the first traveling announcer in the business, and the fame of his voice spread around the country.

Announcers in those days commonly used megaphones, but Fog Horn scorned such amplification. For really big crowds, several announcers were usually hired. The head caller would shout the event, and the next would shout it to the people within

earshot of him, then the next would pick it up, and so on. But the managers rarely hired assistant announcers for Clancy. He didn't need them.

Once he was hired as chief announcer for a grandstand a quarter of a mile long, which held 80,000 people. Five relay callers were hired too, but after the first performance they were fired. All 80,000 people could hear Clancy himself quite clearly.

His greatest triumph and first real fame came in 1911 at the Kansas State Fair. The honor guest of the occasion was President William Howard Taft, and Clancy was requested to tell the crowd to refrain from applause until the end, to make it as easy as possible for the President to be heard.

Taft was apparently greatly impressed by the volume of this announcement, for he began his speech by saying, "If I possessed the magnificent voice of Fog Horn Clancy, you might all hear me with no difficulty."

This quote, to Fog Horn's delight, was picked up by the papers, and he got so famous that people used to come to rodeos just to hear the voice that the President had praised. He also used the clippings to get himself jobs. His price went up, and he was greatly in demand from New York to California.

Clancy loves to talk about those great days, traveling all over, meeting famous people and introducing them to the crowds. He always got a kick out of the events he was describing, too, and was a pioneer in helping the spectators understand rodeo.

"Of course," he admits, "you can't explain so much to folks when you're hollering at them as when you're just whispering to them over a mike. I always tried to sound as if I wasn't hollering, though. It took a lot of practice to make my voice just fit into whatever space it was supposed to cover."

Clancy was born with the voice, but he constantly trained and improved it, too. Every day he did breathing exercises and tried to increase his range and his delivery. He worked as hard on his voice as an opera singer does.

"And whenever I got to a new place I'd look it over carefully, trying to figure out just how much power I needed. There was no use trying it out, because an empty grandstand gives you no idea of what you'll need for a full grandstand.

Learning how to project my voice just the right amount to be able to cover each arena or stadium was the hardest thing. And I'm still not quite sure how I'd know I was reaching everybody. It got to be instinctive."

In 1920 Fog Horn started branching out with a couple of sidelines.

He put on a few shows, acted as press agent as well as announcer for the Tex Austin show, and he managed a lady bulldogger on the side.

By 1924 public address systems were being more commonly used in the big shows. Competition for announcing jobs got keener and keener, and Clancy decided to get out of the field. He's been sticking to publicity ever since. For nine years he worked for the Madison Square Garden Rodeo, for three full seasons with Roy Rogers, and for 15 years he has handled publicity for the JE Ranch Rodeos in the East.

Fog Horn also has a hobby, for which rodeo fans should thank him. He's the only man who has kept extensive records of his favorite sport. He puts out a yearly record book, and has written his autobiography, *My Fifty Years in Rodeo.* His study in Waverly, N. Y., bulges with clippings, records and files.

"My wife—" he sighed and shook his head—"she's been dead for 13 years—well, she and the five youngsters used to kid me about all this stuff. But I'd say, you wait, some day people will be interested in rodeo history and records. And at last they're starting to."

He glanced around at the accumulation of papers.

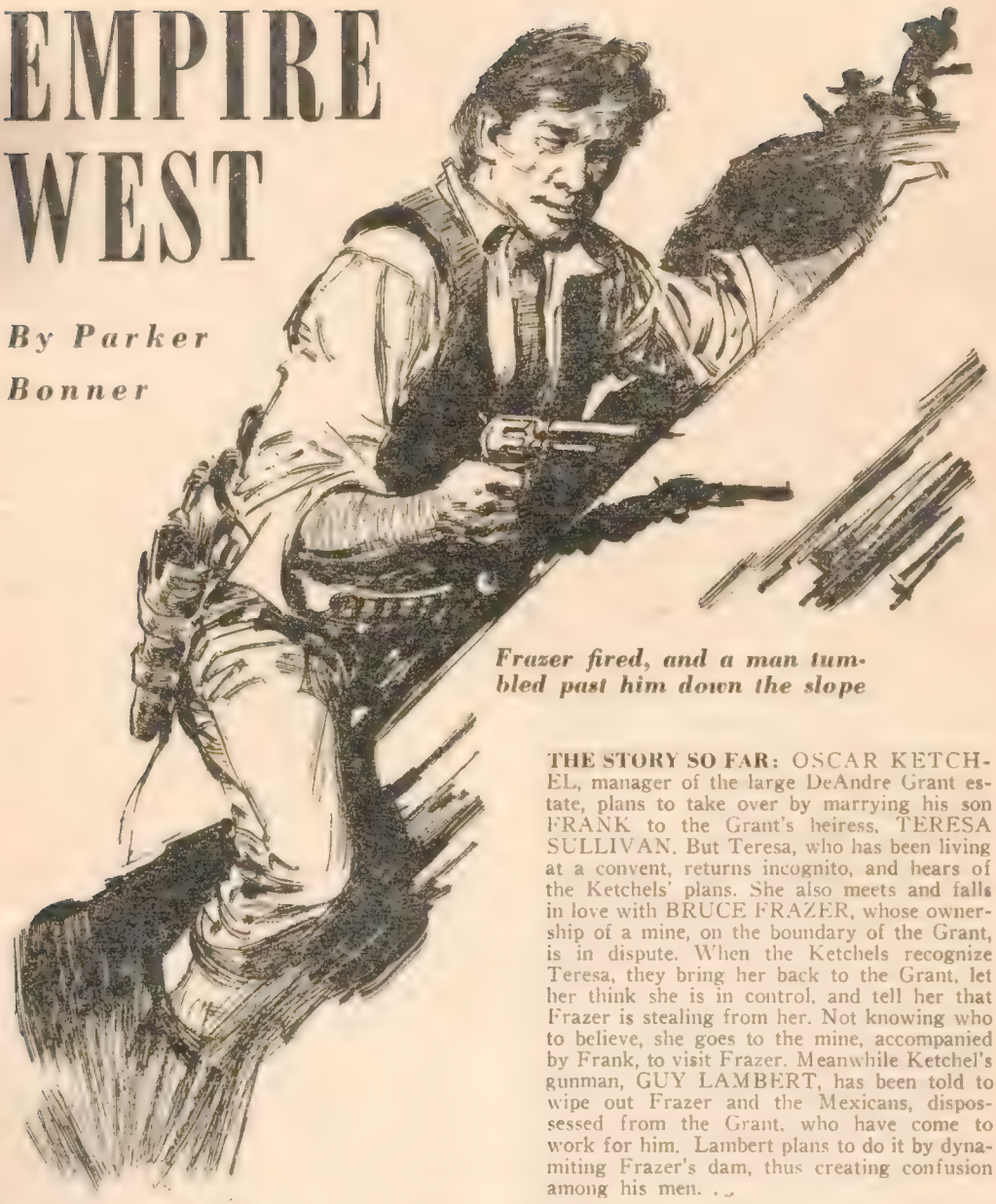
"Must get this stuff sorted out," he said. And then he grinned, "Oh, well, I've still got plenty of time."

Adios

THE EDITORS

EMPIRE WEST

By Parker Bonner



Frazer fired, and a man tumbled past him down the slope

THE STORY SO FAR: OSCAR KETCHEL, manager of the large DeAndre Grant estate, plans to take over by marrying his son FRANK to the Grant's heiress, TERESA SULLIVAN. But Teresa, who has been living at a convent, returns incognito, and hears of the Ketchels' plans. She also meets and falls in love with BRUCE FRAZER, whose ownership of a mine, on the boundary of the Grant, is in dispute. When the Ketchels recognize Teresa, they bring her back to the Grant, let her think she is in control, and tell her that Frazer is stealing from her. Not knowing who to believe, she goes to the mine, accompanied by Frank, to visit Frazer. Meanwhile Ketchel's gunman, GUY LAMBERT, has been told to wipe out Frazer and the Mexicans, dispossessed from the Grant, who have come to work for him. Lambert plans to do it by dynamiting Frazer's dam, thus creating confusion among his men. . .

PART THREE

TAP DUNKIN drove into Sante Fe, stabled his team and then ordered the powder at the big hardware store. Afterward he moved on down the street and entered Spellman's office.

Lambert's orders had been explicit. He was not to take a drink or to speak to anyone unless it was necessary. Lambert understood the little killer, and he did not want Tap to get into trouble.

The lawyer was at his roll-top desk. He looked up, a trace of annoyance showing on his florid face. "Can I help you?"

"I'm from the Grant," Tap told him.

He did not like the lawyer's manner. "I've got a message from Oscar Ketchel."

Spellman extended his hand.

"It isn't on paper," Tap Dunkin said. "I was to tell you that right after the fifteenth you should file on the Diablo Canyon mineral claims in the name of the Grant."

The lawyer was staring at the little gunman. "Isn't that the ground young Frazer filed on?"

"Frazer won't be there after the fifteenth."

Spellman drew a short, quick breath. "What's going to happen to Frazer?"

Tap shrugged. "We'll run him out."

"You think he won't fight you?"

"Not if he's dead."

Spellman's voice was suddenly nervous. "I want no part in this. Ketchel is heading for trouble."

"You'll do as he says." It wasn't a threat. Tap Dunkin never made threats. It was merely a statement of fact.

But Spellman sensed a threat, and it made him more uneasy. "Whose name am I supposed to file the claim in? It's got to be an individual. It can't be in the name of the Grant."

This was over Tap's head. All he knew was what Guy Lambert had told him, and he meant to see that the foreman's orders were carried out. "You file like he said."

Spellman had never before met Dunkin and he said, "You tell Ketchel that if he's through taking my advice he'd better get himself another lawyer."

Not in years had anyone dared to use that tone to the small gunman, but even in his mounting anger he remembered Lambert's instructions to keep out of trouble. He stood for a moment, rigid, then turned and walked quietly out of the office, shutting the door soundlessly behind him.

Spellman gazed at the closed door in blank surprise. Something in the manner of Tap's quiet departure frightened him more than any words. He sat motionless for fifteen minutes. Then an idea came to him, and he smiled. Why hadn't he thought of this before?

He rose and crossed the Plaza toward the Capital building, not conscious that Tap watched him from one of the shadowed doorways, that Tap followed him noiselessly.

INSIDE the land office, Spellman sought a clerk with whom he had been on friendly terms. Together they had worked more than one deal to their mutual advantage, for a good third of the land titles in the Territory were questionable, and a smart man could usually make himself a profit by keeping his eyes open.

"It's this way," Spellman explained. "You know that young Frazer has filed on the Diablo Mines, and that they are supposed to belong to the DeAndre Grant?"

His friend nodded. "I know. I took Frazer's application. He insisted that the canyon is north of the Grant."

Spellman wet his dry lips. "I'm inclined to agree, although the courts will have to order a complete survey. But I have information that Frazer won't be occupying the canyon after the fifteenth."

The clerk's eyes asked a silent question. Spellman said, "The less either of us knows about that part the better. Now, I've been ordered to file, as of the fifteenth, in the name of the DeAndre Grant. The filing should be made in the name of an individual."

"Who?"

"Why not me?"

The silence between them grew heavy with meaning. Then the clerk laughed suddenly.

"It's perfectly safe," Spellman said. "I can always point out to Ketchel that I filed only as his agent, and will transfer my claim any time he wishes. But if something should happen to Ketchel, I'd own a silver mine."

The clerk chuckled.

"So fix up the application. I'll sign it, then you hold it until the fifteenth." He was so intent on what he was doing that he did not see Tap Dunkin as the little man passed the open doorway.

Half an hour later Spellman left the building, very pleased with himself. If

Ketchel should be successful in ousting Frazer from the canyon, he would transfer the claim to the manager; but if Ketchel should happen to be killed in the canyon fight, he saw no reason why he should not keep the mine for himself.

Tap Dunkin followed the lawyer back to his office. Something in Spellman's manner bothered him, but he did not know quite what to do. He got his team from the livery, loaded the powder, and started out of town. But before he reached the edge of the village he turned back and drove to the Plaza. In the land office he found the same clerk on duty that he had seen talking to Spellman. Dunkin approached him directly.

"Lawyer Spellman was in here a while ago. He was supposed to file on Diablo Canyon. Did he?"

The land office man stared at Tap. "And just who are you to be asking questions?"

Tap glanced around. It was near the siesta hour and the big building was nearly empty. He pulled his right hand gun and shoved it against the clerk's chest. "I want to see that application."

The clerk looked at Tap. He felt the gun boring into him. His lips were stiff but he managed to say, "Why not? It's in that drawer."

"Get it."

He got it.

Tap took it with one hand and stared at the writing. Finally he looked up, his eyes deadly. "This mean Spellman's trying to steal the mine for himself?"

The clerk opened his mouth to protest, but Tap's chilly eyes changed his mind, and he fumbled. "I don't know anything about it."

"You do," said Tap. "I watched you and Spellman talk."

The clerk wet his lips. "I guess you're right . . ."

"Stay here." It never entered Tap's head that the clerk would not obey. He left the office and crossed the Plaza, finding Spellman half asleep at his desk. He laid the application on the desk with one hand and drew his gun with the other.

"Start talking."

Spellman tried to explain. Suddenly he was very frightened, but the more he talked the more certain Tap was that he was lying.

"You thieving skunk," Tap said. He shot Spellman twice, both bullets catching the lawyer full in the face.

OSCAR KETCHEL listened to Lambert's report with disbelief. "You mean the little runt walked into Spellman's office and shot him, and then drove quietly out of town without anyone trying to stop him?"

"It was siesta time. You know that town—it sleeps for a couple of hours every afternoon."

Ketchel shuddered. Lambert handed him the copy of the application that Tap had brought home with him. Ketchel stared at it dully. "That land office clerk is going to talk as soon as they find Spellman's body."

Lambert was indifferent. "Have you ever seen a law officer up here since you came to the Grant?"

Ketchel hadn't, but he still did not like the idea. "There will be stink enough after we run Frazer out of the canyon. This is merely going to make things worse."

"Look," said Lambert. "The trouble with you is that you want things done, but you aren't willing to take any chances. We're the men who do your dirty work and take the chance of stopping a bullet. Do you want Frazer taken care of, or don't you?"

"Of course, but . . ."

"There aren't any buts," said Lambert. He turned and left the house.

Before sundown he and Tap Dunkin rode into one of the line camps, bringing the powder with them. Neither of the Ketchels had offered to accompany them, and Lambert was glad of this. He wanted no interference, once he had his attack under way.

He briefed his crew, studying them as he talked, thinking that in all his years along the border he had never seen a tougher collection of men.

"It's this way," he said. "We'll split. Half of us will come up onto the canyon from the east, half from the west, and Tap

will take four of you and blow up the dam. You've got to capture the guards without a shot, because a shot will warn Frazer that there's trouble coming."

They listened.

"When the flood strikes the mine Frazer's men will try to climb the canyon walls. I want to make certain that not one of them gets out alive." They looked back at him unblinkingly, neither shocked nor dismayed.

"And I'll personally skin any man who lets himself be seen by one of Frazer's guards. Okay, let's ride."

They split into three groups, one under Phil Strong, who had served as roundup boss for two years, four men under Tap Dunkin, the rest following Lambert.

He led them in a wide circle, entering the timbered hills a good twenty miles west of the canyon entrance and ranging upward until the sun dropped behind the distant peaks. Then they made a fireless camp, certain that when the sun next rose Frazer's men would be trapped in the canyon.

Tap Dunkin led his party along the highest ridge, humming softly a tune he had learned in the dancehalls years before. Within him was a growing excitement, for he thrived on violence. Just at dusk they reached the rim above the small lake and peered downward through the trees. Tap studied the ground with a practiced eye, saw smoke trickle from the cabin across the dam, and guessed that Frazer's guards were at their evening meal.

He sent two of his men to work around the west side of the lake and get into the canyon below the dam. This was a precaution in case he and the rest were spotted, and the guards tried to flee down toward the mine. With his other two riders he circled high through the timber, coming down behind the cabin.

It was full dark before they completed their circle. Only the light, shining from the cabin window, guided their progress. It was Tap who reached the door first, quiet as a hunting cat, both his big guns in his hands. The surprise was complete. He had kicked the door inward and vaulted into the room before its occupants guessed that there was anyone within ten miles.

THE man at the stove was tall and redheaded. His face was freckled and his eyes were green. He turned, holding a hot skillet, and his mouth slacked with surprise.

"What the hell?"

His partner was short and muscular and dark haired. He was older, more hardened, a veteran of a hundred barroom fights. No real surprise showed on his face, no fear, but a studied wariness, as he shifted toward where his holstered gun hung from a wall peg.

Tap stopped him with a motion of his right gun. "Put that skillet back on the stove."

The redhead obeyed slowly. "Who are you? What do you want?"

The shorter one already knew what they wanted. He said, tonelessly, "You win."

Tap glared at them. The impulse to squeeze both triggers was nearly overpowering, but Guy Lambert's orders were explicit. He motioned them against the wall, saying to the man behind him, "Keep them covered, Mark." Then he dropped his own guns into their holsters and, crossing, picked up a heavy knife that was lying on the table.

Mark's voice struck him, sharply. "No killing, Tap. Tie them up."

Tap paid no attention. The redhead was still standing beside the stove. Suddenly he grabbed the skillet and sent it flying at Tap's head with a long, looping throw.

Tap ducked like a trained boxer, the skillet missing him by inches. The redhead charged after it, throwing a roundhouse blow. Tap ducked. Then he closed in, seizing the guard around the body with his free arm, bringing the heavy knife up and down with the other. They went to the floor together, but the redhead was already without life.

Tap rolled clear and came to his feet, his twisted face very pale, the walls of his nostrils quivering. He stooped, pulled the knife free, and looked at the other guard.

Mark caught his arm. "Tap, stop it."

Tap stopped. He stared at Mark as if he had never seen him before, then said in a low tone, "Get out of here. If I ever see you again I'll kill you."

For an instant Mark was motionless, his face suddenly harsh with desire. But under Tap's steady gaze he turned away without a word and moved out the door. Tap did not even look after him. He dragged the dead man out of the cabin and waited while the other guard was tied securely.

Tap's other two men came up from the canyon below the dam, and they all ate silently. Afterward, by the light of a lantern, they planted the powder under the center of the dam and sat down to wait for daylight. Lambert had told him to light the fuse just as light started to appear in the east.

POP OBER and Bruce Frazer worked late at the mill, unconscious of Lambert's men creeping through the timber above them. "Another three days," Frazer said, as he wiped his hands free of grease, "and the tunnel should break through into the vein."

Pop Ober sighed with weariness. Nearing seventy, he was beginning to realize that he could not do as much work in a day as he once had done. They stepped out and stared down at the new houses taking shape along the creek. Then they turned toward their bunks and were almost instantly asleep.

They were roused by the sound of the distant explosion, echoing down the canyon. Pop tumbled out of his bunk, but Frazer had already hauled on his pants and was kicking into his boots. His first thought was that their powder house had blown, but as he came outside he saw it still intact, showing faintly in the morning half-light.

Then they heard the swelling roar of racing water. "The dam." The words burst from Frazer, and he turned to stare up the canyon.

Men were running into the open behind him and he turned to shout his warning. The sound of the water was growing. He ran down to the corral, opening the gate, praying that the horses would somehow find a way of saving themselves.

Pop was shouting to him from the mill, and the laborers and gun hands were starting to climb the steep canyon walls. Frazer ran toward Pop, who was at the foot of the ladder leading upward toward the tunnel mouth.

Above them half a dozen men were already climbing for their lives.

Frazer pushed Pop ahead of him and began to climb. As he did so he glanced over his shoulder, and saw the wall of water suddenly race into sight around the upper bend. Pop had reached the second ladder section and started up it. Frazer was at his heels. Then the flood struck the mill, ripping the new building from its foundations, rolling on to engulf the corral and the new houses.

Bruce Frazer stopped, standing on the ladder. The section below him had been torn away and dirty water almost lapped at the soles of his boots.

And then the first shots came. He heard the thud of a bullet strike the damp earth to his right, and without thinking began his scrambling climb again.

Pop was at the ladder's top, turning to give him a hand. Then Frazer saw the bullet strike, and saw Pop fall, sliding down the new dump, catching for a moment on a rock splinter, then slipping on, until his body rolled into the billowing flood.

It happened so quickly Frazer had no time for grief. He made the top of the ladder and, with bullets kicking up the dirt around his legs, dived into the shelter of the tunnel.

The firing had increased. He sat up, realizing that the shots were coming from both canyon rims. This was murder of the most brutal kind. He glanced at the men behind him. Two were Mexicans, and he recognized Juanita's cousin Pedro. The others were miners and guards. The guards had side arms, and one even had taken time to grab a rifle.

The miners and Mexicans were not armed at all.

HE CREPT, flat on his belly, to have a look at the battle outside. Half a dozen of his men were pinned along the sharp canyon walls, trying to hide behind rocks or in the thin brush. It was hopeless. One after another were found by the searching shots and fell, their bodies disappearing into the swirl of water.

Inside Frazer was raging, but there was nothing he could do. Some of the fire had shifted to the tunnel mouth, and bullets searched the loose dirt, driving him back to better shelter. One riccocheted, striking a Mexican in the leg. The guard with the rifle cursed and pressed forward, but Frazer pulled him back.

"No good getting killed. We need every man, if we ever expect to get out of here."

The guard's face was drawn and bitter. "The damn murderers. I've done my share of killing, but I've never been boxed by a bunch like this. They're worse than Apaches."

Frazer was as bitter, but he wasted no strength cursing the Ketchels. The man with the rifle was named Thorne, and he was something of a natural leader. He asked, "What do we do, sit here and die like rats in a trap?"

Frazer said, "If we can stick it out until dark, maybe some of us can get away."

"If they don't dig us out before then."

Frazer looked at him in the half light from the tunnel entrance. Then he glanced at one of the miners. "Is there any dynamite in the tunnel?"

He himself had issued strict orders against ever leaving dynamite anywhere but the powder house, but he knew that the rule was constantly broken.

The miner nodded. "About half a box, I think."

"Any fuse?"

Again the man nodded.

"Get it."

The man crept back toward the face and returned, carrying the box. Thorne said, sourly, "What good will that do us?"

Frazer grinned with his lips only. "It will keep them from climbing the canyon side after us." He turned to the box. It was crude dynamite, tricky to use, and he handled it with care, tying it into three-stick bunches and attaching a foot and a half of fuse to each bunch.

Afterward he took the rifle from Thorne and worked forward until he could peer down at the canyon. The swirl of the flood was already dropping. Another hour and the water from the lake would be gone, the stream would be back within its low banks. The shooting had almost stopped, but he knew that the men still watched from the rims. This had been carefully planned, and it was obvious that they did not mean to leave anyone alive.

He watched the far slope but could see no sign of movement. And then he saw Tap Dunkin and his men riding down from the shattered dam, their horses splashing through the still foot-deep water. He could easily have shot Dunkin, but he stayed the impulse, since all the ammunition they had was in the single rifle.

He lay quiet, watching, and saw men slide down the far canyon wall and join Dunkin, who had ridden past the wrecked mill and halted at the lower turn. Time dragged. The creek shrank within its banks, leaving the canyon floor carpeted with a thick layer of sticky mud. The mill was gone entirely. The new houses had been swept away too, but their foundations still showed faintly in the mud. Everything they had worked for had been washed away. The anger within him was a dull coal eating through him, as he thought of the waste, of Pop's death, of the senseless murders.

THORNE was getting restless, but he needed Thorne as he needed the others, and he had to make them understand that he was still the leader.

He pulled back, saying evenly, "I'm going to wait until dark, and then I'm going to get you out of here."

Thorne sneered. "Don't you think Guy Lambert has thought of that? Don't you think they'll be waiting for us?"

"I'll give them something else to think of," he promised. "You'll get out."

They stared at him, wanting to believe,

trying to believe. Hope dies hard, even in condemned men. He busied himself with the wounded Mexican. The wound was a shallow one, burned across the calf of the leg, two inches above the ankle. The man nodded when Frazer asked if he could walk, and managed a little smile.

Frazer thought, that's the mark of these people. Through centuries of near slavery they still have retained their ability to laugh.

"Cheer up," he said. "As soon as the sun goes down I'll give you a chance to walk. Don't worry about that."

Darkness came slowly, the light seeming to linger long after the sun was gone. Frazer had gathered up his homemade bombs and carried them to the tunnel entrance. The men watched him in silence, still hopeful, yet fearful that the hope was a delusion.

Frazer turned to face them in the last dying light. "See that path from the top of the dump? It runs along the canyon wall a good two hundred feet. Now, Thorne is going to call down to Lambert. They're all camped at the lower curve. While he talks, I want you to slip out along that path, one at a time. Don't knock over a rock, and don't make noise."

Thorne said, "And at the end of the path, what? There must be men waiting for us up on the rim."

Frazer grinned at him. "You aren't going to climb up, you're going down into the canyon."

They thought he was crazy. "They'll see us, hear us."

He shook his head. "They'll be too busy ducking the dynamite to think of anything for a few minutes. As soon as you reach the bottom, head up canyon to the cabin beside the dam. The guards are probably dead, but their horses may still be there and, if you're in luck, so will their guns."

Hope gleamed in their eyes. He made it sound so possible.

"Go ahead, Thorne."

For an instant the man hesitated, staring down into the darkness which now blanketed the canyon floor, at the small fire the Grant riders had kindled at the curve a quarter of a mile below. Then Thorne cupped his hands, shouting down into the night.

"Lambert, Guy Lambert."

A faint haloo answered.

"We want to talk."

There was silence, then Lambert's voice, closer now as if he were moving up canyon. "What do you want?"

"To make a deal."

BESIDE Thorne, Frazer pushed one Mexican out along the little trail in the darkness, then a second man, and a third.

"I'll talk to Frazer."

"He isn't here."

There was silence from below for a minute. "Where is he?"

"Dead, maybe. I don't know."

There was a muttered conference below. Another man crept along the trail, then another.

"I don't believe you. We haven't found his body." It was Lambert.

Frazer pushed the last miner from the tunnel, then grasped Thorne's shoulder, whispering, "Get going. Leave me the rifle and keep talking until you reach the end of the dump."

He felt rather than saw the rifle thrust into his hands. Then he was alone, hearing Thorne shout as he crawled away, "If you don't believe me, come up here and see for yourself."

Lambert's voice was uncertain. "How many of you up there?"

"Eight."

"Slide down, one at a time. We'll let you ride out." He broke off as a rock, dislodged by one of the fleeting men, bounded down into the canyon depths. At once a rifle cracked from below, and Lambert bellowed, "Watch the rim, boys—the rim. They're trying to get away."

Frazer had been waiting, holding a bundle of dynamite in one hand, a match in the other. He struck the match, lit the fuse, let it burn nearly half its length, and hurled his makeshift bomb toward where Lambert's voice seemed to originate.

It exploded just as it reached the canyon floor, and for an instant it bathed the canyon in a whitish glare which blinded the watchers with its unexpectedness.

Frazer already had lighted the second bundle. A great shouting cry welled up to him from below, and a dozen rifles spoke, spitefully, chipping the earth around the tunnel entrance.

Frazer threw his third bomb and yet his fourth. He had no idea whether or not his men were making good their escape. Then with the last bomb in his hand he lit the fuse, hurled it into the canyon and, turning, climbed the steep bank as rapidly as he could.

It was fifty feet upward to the opening of the old workings, but a rough set of steps had been carved from the rock to facilitate the climb. He scrambled up these, using one hand as a third foot, while he clutched the rifle with the other hand. His driving desire was for speed, in the hope that the attention of the guards on the rim would still be held by the explosions in the canyon below, at least long enough for him to gain the old workings.

He came up over the breasting and saw above him the dark shape of a man. He fired, and heard a great yell, and then the man tumbled past him down the slope and a voice called sharply from his right. He fired again, and heard a thrashing in the brush. Someone shouted from further along the rim, and there was the sound of a running horse. He was out of the workings now and into the timber, grinning tightly to himself. The darkness and their very numbers favored him, for he could fire at anything that moved, while they must be careful not to shoot a friend.

He stopped to listen, steadying his breathing, and heard excited voices from the bottom of the canyon. Then he moved forward, careless of direction, only wanting to put as much distance as he could between himself and the Grant riders.

HE DROPPED down through the next canyon and reached the shelf from which Guy Lambert had watched the operations of the mine. There he stopped to rest, realizing suddenly how very tired and weak he was. Behind him the night stillness was unbroken, but he knew that they had not given up their search. He moved on. The moon came up and he welcomed the light, which showed him the rough underfooting, but he clung to the shadows so that no distant watcher might spot him.

He climbed steadily toward the crest of the range, veering eastward so that he would come out behind the hollow where the lake had been. But the moon was fading in the sky and the sun was nearly up before he circled the mud flat of the lake and came down toward the small cabin from the rear.

There was no sign of life, no smell of smoke in the air, as he watched the cabin from the edge of the timber. He had no way of knowing whether his men had reached here or if, for that matter, Lambert's riders were watching the spot. It could be a trap. But there was probably food within the cabin, and he badly needed to eat. He decided to take his chance, and made a run for it across the clearing.

The cabin door was open, and he ducked into the shelter of the room, calling sharply as he entered. There was no response. The place was deserted. He went quickly to the grub box and was shocked to find it empty, except for a handful of beans and a little coffee. He had stocked it himself less than a week before.

He moved back to the house door and stood studying the yard. Suddenly movement within the trees caught his attention, and he lifted the rifle.

"Senor, don't shoot." It was Pedro who stepped quickly into view.

Frazer's reaction was so great that the rifle trembled. "Pedro." He was moving quickly toward the Mexican. "The others —where are they?"

"Gone."

He stopped, not understanding. "Gone? Where?"

"Quien sabe? Over the mountains, east, west, who knows?"

Suddenly Bruce Frazer was filled with a tremendous anger. He had gotten them

free of the tunnel, saved them by covering the retreat, and they had ridden off without him. Then he controlled himself, saying in a normal voice, "All right, what happened?"

"It was Senor Thorne. He said you'd never escape alive. He said they were fools to wait until Lambert's men came."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"I could not leave Juan. The hole in his leg hurts very much. I take him up the hill and hide him, then I come back down to watch for you."

Frazer squeezed his thin shoulder. "Did they take all the food?"

"All but a little. I make them leave one horse for Juan. I grab a gun and threaten them."

Frazer stared at him blankly. He was alone in a hostile country save for two Mexicans—one wounded—and between them they had almost no food.

"Let's find Juan," he said, and followed Pedro back up the slope.

THE news of the Diablo Canyon massacre spread across the stretches of the Grant rapidly, for news has a way of travelling in that empty land. But most of Lambert's crew were still in the canyon area, although Guy Lambert was not with them. Lambert was dead. Frazer's first homemade bomb had landed less than a half a dozen feet from him at the bottom of the dump.

Tap Dunkin was like a wild man when he found the foreman's body. He raged, and would have climbed the canyon wall had not some of the cooler heads dragged him back. But he did not give up, even when morning came and they learned for certain that the men from the tunnel had all escaped. "It's your skin," he told the shattered crew. "There isn't much law, but we don't want any of that bunch getting away to talk to the governor."

He split his men into three groups. He guessed that the fugitives would not try the high mountains. He sent the first group toward the northwest to reach the

[*Turn page*]

"Hey You SKINNY Bag of Bones!"

YOU can WIN This big Silver Trophy

That's what the boys shouted at me ONLY A FEW WEEKS AGO . . . But look at me NOW, PAL . . . A trophy-Winning JOWETT HE-MAN like YOU can be SOON!

Your Name on it

YES! John Sill

5-WAY PROGRESSIVE POWER can make YOU an ALL-AROUND WINNER

- In Civilian Life or Armed Services
- A Winner of Success on JOB
- A Winner of FRIENDS, GIRLS.
- A Winner at ALL SPORTS.
- A Winner of Trophies.
- A Hero on the DANCE FLOOR
- A Hero at BEACH, GYM.
- A Hero to your SWEETHEART.
- A LEADER in any crowd

This "Easy as Pie" NATURAL Method gives you All Around CHAMP STRENGTH—All Over MR AMERICA BUILD!

Let me Prove in 10 THRILLING MINUTES A DAY I can make YOU an ALL-AMERICAN ALL-AROUND HE-MAN

FAST—OR IT WON'T COST YOU A CENT

SAYS GEORGE F. JOWETT—

WORLD'S GREATEST BUILDER OF HE-MEN

YES! YOUR SUCCESS STORY can soon be like Sill's!

How weakling wins trophy as MAGNIFICENT HE-MAN! Few weeks ago everyone picked on John . . . No guts to fight for his rights. TODAY everyone admires John's movie-star build—his mighty ARMS, broad BACK, heroic CHEST. His ATHLETIC ability. His ENERGY at work. His POPULARITY. How GIRLS go for him! NO! I don't care if you're 14 or 40, if you're SKINNY or flabby. Give me 10 EXCITING MINUTES to make you over in your home by the method I turned myself from a wreck into A WORLD CHAMPION.

YES! Add INCH on INCH of MIGHTY MUSCLE to your ARMS. Deepen your CHEST Broaden your SHOULDERS. Gain SIZE, SPEED POWER! Become an All-American HE-MAN! A WINNER in everything you tackle—or you won't pay one cent!

DEVELOP YOUR $20 MUSCLES

Gain POUNDS, INCHES fast! Friend, I travelled the world. Made a LIFETIME study of EVERY way known to build your body. Then I devised the BEST, "5-WAY PROGRESSIVE POWER", the ONLY method that builds you 5 WAYS fast. Save YEARS, DOLLARS, like MANY THOUSANDS like you did. Mail Coupon NOW!

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WHAM

JOE WALLOPED ANOTHER HOMER! HE'S SURE TO BE CAPTAIN NOW

JOE YOUR NEW ENERGY AND APPEARANCE SURE DO A GOOD JOB! YOU EARNED YOUR PROMOTION

JOES JOWETT HE MAN STRENGTH AND BUILD WON HIM THOSE STRIPES

George F. Jowett Whom experts call "Champion of Champions"

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old Spanish Trail and set up a roadblock. A smaller group he sent southeast, past the point where the Rock Springs road joined the trail, with orders to stop anyone who tried to get through to Santa Fe. These were the two jaws of his trap.

With ten men remaining he set himself to search the rough country between, working through the breaks and washes as if they had been hunting stray cattle, and it was this group who flushed Thorne and his followers.

It was nearly dark when the man riding on the wing saw the figure appear on the next ridge and then fade back into the timber. He sent up his long halloo, and the crew came spurring toward him. Had it been earlier in the day Tap would not have fallen into the trap, for trap it was. But Tap was afraid that darkness would close down and they would again lose the trail.

The man they had seen was Thorne. He had spotted Dunkin's group minutes before they saw him, and decided on a desperate gamble. There were seven with him, and had they all been mounted and well armed he would have taken his chances on a running fight. But they had only two horses and three rifles, taken from the cabin beside the dam.

He hid his forces in the heavy timber on both sides of a small narrow canyon, and used himself for bait, letting Tap's men see him and only pulling back through the narrow canyon when he was certain they were following.

They crashed into the timber almost at his heels, and rode yelling into the narrow cut. The crossfire from both sides was murderous. Four revolvers added their hammer to the whip-like crack of the three rifles. A horse went down, a man at Dunkin's elbow threw up both hands and pitched forward. Tap's own horse was hit, but long experience made him kick free and roll clear of the falling animal. He crawled hastily behind a tree. The light in the timber was already indistinct. The men in the brush, having delivered their fire, had turned and fled.

Tap heard horses coming back down the draw. A single voice called, "Tap, Tap."

He stepped out then, wary and careful. "Watch yourself. They may be still around." He drew one shot and fired in return, then came up to the four men who remained to him and looked at them in disgust.

He had been a fool, and he cursed himself silently, but cursing would do no good. With the men he still had he knew that there was no chance of running down Thorne's men. Reluctantly he gave the order to ride for the nearest line camp.

FAR to the eastward Bruce Frazer heard the sound of the ambush. The distance was so great that he could not tell how many shots were fired. He had waited all day in the timber while Juan slept, an idea growing in his mind.

"Pedro, do you think some of your people could hide me on the Grant?"

The Mexican nodded. "Even in Rock Springs we could hide you with safety, Senor. Ketchel, he does not know what happens in that town, and my people do not talk."

Frazer nodded. It never entered his head to try to get out of the country. It was not only revenge that held him here, but the knowledge that if he went away Teresa would be without a single friend in her fight with the Ketchels.

"As soon as it's dark we'll get out of here," he told Pedro, "and go to one of the sheep camps where we can get food. If we're careful we won't run into any of the Grant crew."

At dusk he heard the firing, and judged that it was well east of the canyon. He decided to take the chance of going down past the mine. They loaded Juan on the horse and moved slowly out, Pedro ahead, scouting in the darkness. The marks of the flood were everywhere, and Frazer was glad that darkness hid part of the wreckage from his eyes. They came out of the canyon and Pedro led them on a westerly course, coming gradually into rougher country. His instinct was remarkable. Before daylight he found the first sheep camp, where they ate, and then redressed Juan's leg.

They slept during the day, comfortable in the shade of the wagon, and moved out as the moon came up, making a second sheep camp before the following day.

They were travelling in a circle. Now they turned southeastward, making a dry camp before the sun rose on the following morning, lying quiet during the daylight hours. They saw cattle here, but they saw no riders. It was as if Ketchel's men were purposely staying out of sight.

At dusk they resumed their journey, Pedro insisting that they were now less than fifteen miles from Rock Springs. He proved his point by leading them down the long slope at three o'clock that morning. By the time day broke they were safely hidden in an adobe on one of the back alleys of the town.

Pedro led the horse away and came back, bringing Ramon Ortega with him. The old major domo was grief-stricken. "It must have been terrible, terrible," he kept repeating over and over. But what can we do? My people are not fighters, Señor, and few of them have guns."

Frazer had expected no real help from the Mexicans. "Have Lambert and his riders come back to town?"

"Lambert is dead," the old man told him. "Only one or two of the riders have come in. What news they brought of the rest I do not know."

Frazer nodded. In his mind he was already forming his own plan. Without men, without help, there was not much that he could do, but he could at least wait until night and then hunt the Ketchels down. If he killed them they could not trouble the girl. And after he killed them . . . he had no plans. It was too much to hope that he might escape himself.

JUANITA brought the news of the Diablo Canyon massacre to Teresa Sullivan, telling the story in wide-eyed fright. She was certain that the Ketchels now meant to murder every Mexican on the Grant.

At first Teresa absolutely refused to be-

[*Turn page*]

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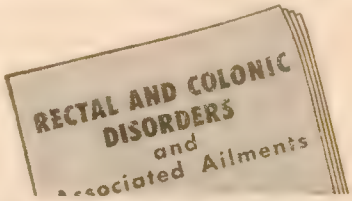

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lieve it, and the account which had reached Rock Springs was badly garbled. No one seemed to know who had fired the first shots, no one knew exactly how many had been killed.

Several of the Mexican laborers had escaped. They had been living further down the canyon than the miners and guards and the canyon walls had been less steep to climb. But once out of the trap, they had taken to their heels through the timber, with the result that they had only a hazy idea of the battle. There was, however, one thing on which all were agreed. The Señor Frazer was dead. They had seen him run to the corral to release the horses, and he must have been caught by the oncoming flood.

Teresa heard this in a kind of trance. She admitted freely to herself that she had loved him. Love, she thought, was something that was hard to understand. It came to you unasked. You met a stranger on the trail, and you loved him, even when you weren't certain that he was not a thief.

She said dully to Juanita, "Who ordered this attack?"

The old woman shrugged. She was still frightened, but a day had now passed and they were still alive. "Who runs the Grant?"

Teresa thought about this silently. In her mind she had built up a great hate for Oscar Ketchel, a terrible loathing. She had to get rid of him. But how? He controlled the property until she was twenty-five—that is, unless she married. The thought grew. Nothing much seemed to matter to her now, nothing except to settle her debt with Oscar Ketchel.

"Go tell Frank Ketchel I want to see him."

The old woman stared at her. "Careful, little one. You are not thinking rightly, you are not in shape."

"Do as I say." Teresa could be imperious at times.

Juanita opened her mouth to protest, then closed it slowly. She had already learned that she could not argue with the girl.

The news that Teresa wanted to see him upset Frank Ketchel badly. He was already upset by the news of the massacre—not that he felt any sympathy for the men who had died, but he did not like the thought that any had escaped.

His father watched him closely. "You'd better go and talk to the girl. We've got to be careful. These Mexicans hate us already. They'd like nothing better than to see us both dead. If they had guns we'd be in a tough spot, with most of our men not in town."

Frank nodded.

"And if the girl should appeal to the governor there's no telling what can happen. Remember, we no longer have Spellman at the capital to fight our battles for us."

Frank said, slowly, "What do you want me to do?"

"Find out what she wants first. I'm surprised that she even sent for you."

FRANK was getting an idea. "I'm not sure. Maybe we can turn this whole thing to our advantage."

His father was not impressed. "How do you figure that?"

Frank said, "By putting the whole blame for this on you. Look, what would be my best argument for getting her to reconsider marrying me? That by so doing she could come into full control of her property."

"Yes, but . . ."

"So I go to her. I pretend to be horrified at what happened at Diablo Canyon. I tell her you are planning to slaughter the rest of her Mexicans. What would she do?"

"You tell me."

"She'd marry me if she thought by so doing she could rob you of the power to do more harm. Don't forget, she is convent raised, she knows very little about the world. I'll make you a small bet. I'll bet you I can persuade her to marry me tonight."

His father drew his breath slowly. "And afterward?"

"What the hell do we care about afterward? Once I'm married to her she

will have to listen to me or something will happen to her. In fact it might be a wonderful idea if she were thrown from a horse. That shouldn't be too hard to arrange."

Oscar Ketchel said, "Don't slip up this time."

"I won't." Frank picked up his hat. He had regained his natural confidence. "This time I won't make any mistake."

So Teresa Sullivan and Frank Ketchel had arrived at the same idea from different points of view. The girl received him in the big front room.

"I've heard what happened in the canyon." She had trouble keeping her voice level. "I can hardly believe it."

He said, gravely, "I'm afraid there is no doubt. It's true all right."

"And you had nothing to do with it."

He said, "You told me once that you loved me. How can you ask that kind of a question?"

She bit her lip. She did not believe him. She knew more about him than she had in San Antonio, but she needed him for her purpose. "But your father knew?"

He made his voice bitter. "My father runs the Grant. He hired Lambert and Tap Dunkin and the rest. He should have controlled them."

"So the blame in his?"

He bowed his head as if the shame of the thought choked his words. "What can I say? I've been arguing with him all morning. What good is argument? What's done is done. I'm leaving the Grant."

She stared at him.

"He's obsessed with power," Frank went on. "If he isn't stopped there's no telling what he will do next."

She took a deep breath. "I could stop him if I were married."

Frank started. He had not expected her to bring up the subject. He had thought that he would have difficulty in twisting the conversation around to his needs.

He said, "But you aren't married."

[*Turn page*]

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She stared at him levelly. "You wanted to marry me once. Would you do it now, even if it means standing against your father?"

THIS was coming much faster than Frank had expected. He took a long, quick breath in an effort to quiet his eagerness. "You mean you'd marry me, after what has happened?"

"I'd do anything to get your father off the Grant."

He came forward to take her hands, but she pulled away. "Not yet. Give me a little time, and don't let your father know. He might try to stop us."

Frank said quickly, "Of course he would."

"Then bring the priest to the house tonight. Tell him not to mention it to anyone."

"Of course." Frank was having difficulty keeping the triumph from his voice.

"And have horses ready, behind the house. We're riding to Sante Fe as soon as we are married. We're going to see the Governor."

"I'll be here," he said, and left the house before she should change her mind, before he betrayed himself. He walked down the hill with the stride of a man who has just conquered the world, and kicked a Mexican out of his way as he crossed the Plaza to his father's house.

The older man looked up from his desk and a slow smile spread across his lips. "I can tell by your look that you were successful."

Frank grinned. "She took the bait. In fact she apparently had had the idea herself. She would marry anyone, I think, to get rid of you. The wedding will be tonight. Afterward we ride to Sante Fe to tell the governor that you are a crook and a scoundrel and a murderer."

Oscar chuckled.

"We'll start," said Frank. "Her horse will fall or something. We will of course not get to Sante Fe."

His father stared at him. "I thought you liked her."

Frank said, "A woman is a woman. There is only one DeAndre Grant, one empire in the west. I'd do a lot to get my hands on it."

Juanita was saying the same thing. She glided into the room as soon as Frank left, her old eyes glittering. "Have you lost your mind," she demanded of the girl. "to give yourself to that wolf?"

Teresa turned on her angrily. "You had no right to listen."

"A good thing I did." Juanita was trembling. "You are marrying a man to get even with Oscar Ketchel. Do you think you can trust the son when you cannot trust the father?"

"I can handle Frank."

"Can you? Doesn't it occur to you that if anything happens to you your husband will own the Grant?"

Teresa was staring at her. "Nothing is going to happen to me."

"Nothing happened to Señor Frazer and the men in Diablo Canyon."

Teresa's small hands tightened at her sides. "I'll take care of myself," she promised. "Nothing will happen to me until I finish with Oscar Ketchel."

Juanita gave up. She retreated to the kitchen and spent an hour trying to decide what to do. Then she left the big house and went in search of Ramon Ortega. She had no idea that the former major-domo could help her, but all her life he had stood for the authority of the Grant, and she had no place else to turn.

SHE found Ortega taking the sun on the south side of the Plaza, and poured into his old ear the story of her troubles.

He listened gravely to what she had to tell, shaking his head from time to time as the full substance of her trouble unfolded.

He hated the Ketchels with a deep, slow, burning hate, the hate that a patient man nurtures in his heart when he knows that he is not strong enough to demand redress. They had displaced him from his position of trust and authority, they had driven his people from their places on the Grant, and they had killed in the Devil's Canyon to the north.

"I cannot understand why it is that she marries him."

"I can," said Juanita. "The man that she loved is dead, and Ketchel holds everything that is dear to her. She is alone and without friends. She thinks that by this marriage she is fighting back. She is wrong. She does not know that they would snuff her out as quickly as they would blow out a candle."

Ortega raised his eyebrows. "The man she loved, who was he?"

"The Señor Frazer. She almost broke when I brought her the news of his death."

"But he is not dead."

Juanita stared at the old man, sadly. "This, my friend, is not the time to make the joke."

"It is not a joke. I have seen him this morning."

"Where?"

"At the house of Martinez where he hides."

The woman rose at once, but Ortega put out a bony hand to stop her. Where are you going?"

"To see him. To tell him to stop this farce of a wedding."

"And someone may follow you, and he will be discovered."

"Then you will get him the word?"

"On one condition. You will tell no one that he lives, not even the patroness. What he decides to do about this must be entirely his own affair. Do you agree?"

Juanita objected but, backed by the authority of many years, he convinced her. "The patroness is not an actress. If she knows he lives she would without doubt call off this wedding, and the Ketchels would know something was afoot. They might even search the town."

Juanita saw the point of this. "But you will tell him. You will say that we suspect her life is in danger. You will also repeat my words that she loves him. Men are sometimes dumbheads. They need a push. If the girl has not the experience to push when proper, it is up to someone to help her."

[*Turn page*]

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Ortega agreed gravely. "I will tell him what you say. You can safely leave things in my hands." He waited until she had departed, then began an apparently idle walk through the twisting maze of alleys which ran between mud-fenced, sunbaked yards until he was certain that he was not being followed, that no one was showing any interest in his movements. Then he sought the Martinez house and rapped on the door.

PEDRO let him in, and he said, courteously, "I would like a few words with Señor Frazer alone."

Pedro nodded. Since childhood he had been taking orders from Ortega. He and Juan slipped into the small rear room, and Frazer looked inquiringly at the old majordomo.

Ortega wasted no time. "The patroness is going to marry Frank Ketchel tonight."

Frazer started. "What's that?"

Ortega carefully repeated everything that Juanita had told him. "She listened at the door as they talked," he explained. "She heard young Ketchel put the blame for the killings directly on his father. She heard him say that he would do anything to help the girl, and she is certain that he lied. She is afraid of what will happen after this wedding. She tried to tell the patroness, but the girl will not listen."

Frazer, who had been asleep, passed a tired hand across his eyes. "Doesn't the little fool know that she can't trust the Ketchels?"

Ortega did not relish hearing Teresa called a fool. He might not believe that she was doing the right thing, but she was Barney Sullivan's daughter, and to Ortega Barney had been something close to God.

"Juanita says that her marrying is caused partly because she believes that you are dead."

Bruce Frazer was surprised. "What has my being dead got to do with it?"

"Juanita says that the girl is in love with you, Señor, that since she supposes you to be dead, she does not care much what happens to her as long as she can run the older Ketchel off the Grant."

Frazer stared at him. "Look, I've seen her less than a dozen times. How could she think that she was in love with me? Your Juanita has been smoking loco weed."

Ortega spread his old hands. "This I do not know about, Señor. Love is a thing which men make casually and women dream about. I guess that Juanita knows much more about it than either of us. The question is, are we to sit by quietly and let this marriage take place?"

Frazer from the first had had no idea of letting the girl marry Frank Ketchel. Aside from his own feelings for her, which he had been trying to push aside, he had no intention of letting the Ketchels get control of the Grant.

He stood up now, smiling at the old Mexican. "Stop worrying about it. Have a couple of horses saddled and out behind the log house after dark." He lifted the gun from its holster, checking the loads, then letting it fall back into place.

"I'm going to that wedding, but don't tell anyone. Don' tell anyone at all."

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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OUR AIR MAIL

(Continued from page 6)

16 to 20

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Happy Wanderer

Dear Editor:

I have been a rodeo follower and a happy wanderer since my release from the Marines. Now I am home for good, and want to hear from boys and girls from everywhere. I am 25, have rusty colored hair, and 5'11" tall. I love all sports. So come on, let's fill my box.

DUSTY SPAETH
Box 193
Drummond, Mont.

Cub Scout

Dear Editor:

I am a 10 year old Cub Scout who would like to collect a small stone from every state in the U. S. A., a scenic postal card, or a small state flag. I will answer every card or letter I receive.

JACK FERGUSON
P.O. Box 266
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Dear Editor:

I am 22 years old, have brown hair and brown eyes. I am small for my age, 4'11". I have a heart condition and don't get out much. My hobbies are collecting picture post cards and salt and pepper shakers. I would like to hear from people all over the world, no matter how young or old.

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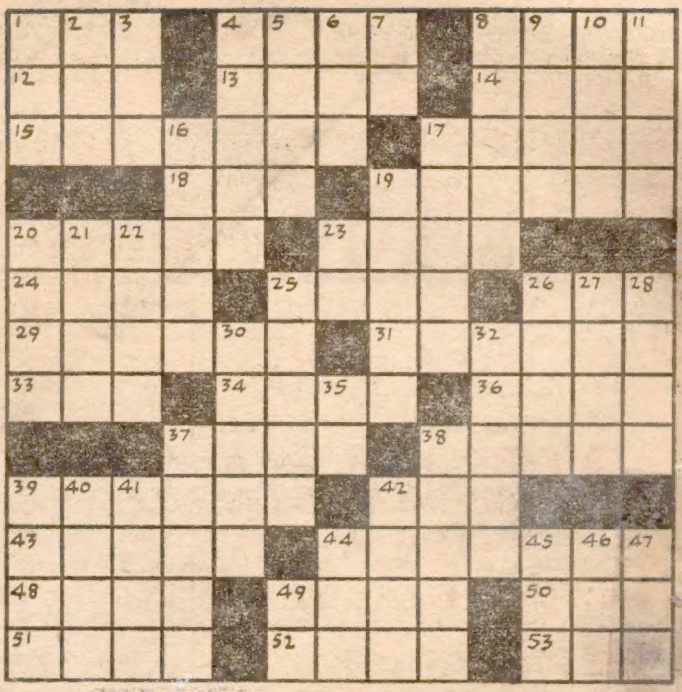
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



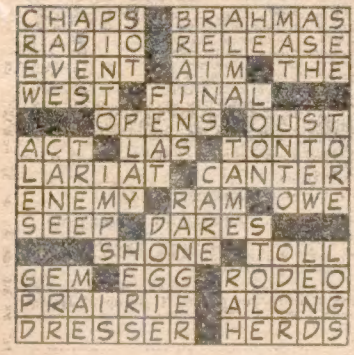
The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Ocean
4 To conceal
8 Coarse file
12 Not well
13 Verbal
14 Chills and fever
15 Newcomer to rodeo
17 To sleep noisily
18 Donkey
19 Horse that pulls at the bit
20 White patch on horse's face
23 Horse's gait
24 Military assistant
25 Flowing garment
26 Set of tools
29 Cowboy's seat
31 Half-wild horse
33 Stammering sounds
34 Breezy
36 Golf mounds
37 Climbing plant
38 Game of skill
39 Horsemen
42 The girl
43 Fragrances
44 Saddle attachment
48 Fondles
49 To close securely
50 Our country (abbr.)
51 Comfort
52 Group of cattle
53 To obtain

DOWN

1 To drink slowly
2 Man's name
3 Everyone
4 Palomino
5 Spring flower
6 River barrier
7 — Paso, Texas
8 Cattle land
9 Excited
10 Certain
11 To look curiously
16 Stared
17 Excellent (slang)
19 Hotel foyer
20 Foundation
21 Teller of untruths
22 Sums up
23 Behold!
25 Bridle straps
26 Leg joint
27 Chills
28 To throw lightly
30 Animal dens
32 Different
35 Musical note
37 Poetry
38 Youngster
39 Lasso
40 Thought
41 Specks
42 Lone — State
44 To look at
45 Floor covering
46 To utilize
47 Lump of butter
49 Hush!



Solution to the puzzle in the preceding issue

Amazing New Way TO A Slimmer Figure

REDUCE WITH *DELICIOUS* KELPIDINE CANDY PLAN!

"WE GUARANTEE YOU WILL LOSE UP TO
5 POUNDS IN 5 DAYS*
10 POUNDS IN 10 DAYS*
15 POUNDS IN 15 DAYS*
25 POUNDS IN 25 DAYS*
AND KEEP IT OFF"**

***How Fast You Lose Weight Depends Upon How Quickly You Order and How Much You Are Overweight**

****You Will Always Want to Keep on Eating Kelpidine Candy—and Keep on the Plan—It KEEPS Weight Off!**

THIS CANDY MUST TASTE AS GOOD AS OR BETTER THAN YOUR FAVORITE CANDY OR YOUR MONEY BACK!

Now at last science has discovered a *new delightfully* thrilling way to take off fat—to lose up to 25 lbs. safely! The secret is that Kelpidine Candy satisfies your *craving* for high calorie foods! It keeps you from *overeating*—the reason most doctors give for being fat! It's the best aid to will power, cuts your *craving* for foods!

NO DANGEROUS DRUGS! NO HARDSHIP DIETS!

Here is thrilling news for fat folks! You can lose up to 25 lbs. in 25 days by simply nibbling on *tasty appetite satisfying* candy, whenever you are tempted to overeat.

YOUR MONEY BACK IF YOU DON'T REDUCE TO THE WEIGHT THAT MOST BECOMES YOU!

Thousands of people were amazed to find that this delicious candy plan actually takes off weight—without dangerous drugs, starvation diet, or hard-to-follow methods. Here's one way to reduce that you will want to continue with to *keep off* fat! The Kelpidine Candy Plan helps you curb your appetite for fattening foods, helps keep you from overeating. Now you reach for a delicious sweet candy instead of fattening foods—it kills the overpowering urge to overeat—to eat between meal-snacks. Your craving for rich, fattening foods is satisfied with this candy plan. Almost like magic you begin to enjoy this plan for reducing.

SENSATIONAL TWO-WAY GUARANTEE!

This sweet delicious Kelpidine Candy plan is guaranteed (1) to take off up to 10 pounds of excess weight in 10 days. (2) to taste better or as good as your favorite candy and to be the best plan you ever followed or you get your money back.

SCIENTIFICALLY AND CLINICALLY TESTED!

That amazing ingredient in Kelpidine candy is the most remarkable discovery for fat people ever made. It's been tested by doctors in test-after-test. The results were far better than doctors ever hoped for! The results were reported in medical journals throughout the world! Doctors are invited to write for details.

HERE'S HOW TO REDUCE AND STAY SLIM!

Most people are fat because of overeating—too much high calorie fattening foods—to your amazement you will want to keep on eating this delicious candy even after you have reduced to the weight that most becomes you and you'll *keep your weight off that way!*

AMAZING DISCOVERY OF SCIENCE!

The Kelpidine Candy plan is the result of scientific research for years for a new discovery for something that will stop your craving for fattening food and also satisfy your appetite. This delicious candy does not turn into ugly fat, it gives you the same feeling of fullness you have after you have eaten a satisfying meal. It kills your desire to overeat—it kills your craving for bedtime snacks and for in-between meal snacks. It's so safe even a child can take it without bad effects. **With Kelpidine Candy all you taste is its deliciousness—you can't tell the difference!**

IT'S UNHEALTHY TO BE FAT!

Insurance companies and doctors tell everyone that too much fat shortens your life! Fat people die years sooner than people with normal weight! So be Safe! Be Fair to yourself! Start taking off ugly fat with delicious tasting Kelpidine Candy plan!

KELPIDINE CANDY IS DIFFERENT!

The amazing clinical *tested* and proven reducing substance contained in Kelpidine Candy is prescribed by many doctors—Don't be misled by imitation products—Kelpidine Candy is the result of scientific research and is the *last word* in Reducing.

DON'T CUT OUT FOODS** CUT DOWN ON CALORIES!

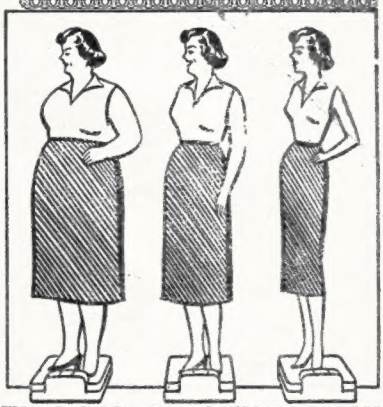
You never starve, you always feel full with Kelpidine Candy plan—You'll never suffer hunger pangs—Your desire for high calorie fattening foods is always *satisfied!* With Kelpidine Candy Plan you eat the same quantity of foods—you merely cut down on the *high calorie rich foods* with the help of Kelpidine Candy. You eat as much as you want, your calorie intake will be *less*—That's the delightful amazing thing!

YOU GET A LIBERAL SUPPLY OF CANDY!

Try the liberal supply of Kelpidine Candy Plan on our 10-day *no risk offer.* Keep a record of your weight—if you are not pleased with your loss of weight; if you can taste any difference between this candy and your favorite candy—return for refund. Just fill out coupon and mail to AMERICAN HEALTHAIDS CO., Dpt. K213, Candy Division, 318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey.

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

You must be entirely satisfied with your loss of weight—This candy must taste as good as or better than your favorite candy—You must get rid of dangerous excess fat or your money will be refunded—Don't delay—You have nothing to lose but excess weight so mail coupon below now!



THIS CAN HAPPEN TO YOU!

WITH THIS DELICIOUS REDUCING CANDY PLAN!

Let this delicious candy plan help you control your desire for fattening food! Let it help you put a stop to the habit of *overeating*—A habit that's so hard to break! Kelpidine candy contains that new discovery many doctors prescribe to help curb your desire to overeat (the main cause of overweight).

$1.00 TRIAL SAMPLE SIZE!

CUT OUT AND MAIL—NO RISK COUPON NOW!

AMERICAN HEALTHAIDS COMPANY, Dpt. K-213
Candy Division,
318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

- ☐ I enclose $1.00, send trial sample size, postage pre-paid!
- ☐ Rush a *Liberal Supply* of Kelpidine *Candy* plan. I enclose $3.00, send postage pre-paid. (I save up to 75c postage by sending payment with order.)
- ☐ Rush a *Large Economy Supply* of Kelpidine *Candy.* I enclose $5.00, send postage pre-paid. (I save up to 90c postage by sending payment with order.)

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Mrs. Ruth Long

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